



ALISA ADAMS

AWAITING THE  
WOLF KILLER  
HIGHLANDER

# **Awaiting the Wolf Killer Highlander**

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Alisa Adams

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## Prologue

**T**hat awful night was fifteen years ago when the full moon

leered down on the bloody hands of the two brothers, making the gore that clung to their pale skin appear as black and sticky as pitch.

Both of them had the same thought, though neither wished to speak it aloud: *No matter how hard I scrub, it will never come off, not completely. I shall wear the vile stain of it for the rest of my days, like the very mark of Cain.*

The smell of bonfires drifted on the breeze, and the lights of the neep lanterns twinkled merrily in the distance. It was the festival of Samhain, the one night of the year when it was said that evil spirits were allowed to roam freely.

The brothers desperately wished that they could blame the tragedy that had stained their hands on such malign forces. Alas, they knew that none would believe them.

And even if any did, they themselves would still know the horrid truth and carry it with them always.

“What are we to do?” the first brother hissed, as panicked and wild-eyed as a deer with an arrow in its side. “When what we have done is discovered, we shall surely be put to death!”

“What if we were to bury the body?” the second asked hopefully. “Then perhaps he might be thought disappeared, rather than...” He could not quite bring himself to utter the dreadful word.

“Then a search will surely be arranged! The recently-disturbed earth will be found, his body will be dug up, and our guilt will be compounded!” He bit his lip, desperately trying to come up with another solution. “What if we brought him into the woods?”

“What purpose would that serve? They would still find him soon enough!”

“Yes,” the first brother said, “but by the time they did, perhaps the beasts of the forest might conceal what caused his death by...that is, um...”

“Gnawing upon him.” The second felt as though he might be sick.

The first nodded.

The second thought it over for several moments, asking himself whether he could find it within himself to do just that. Finally, he shook his head. “We have already done this poor man injury enough without meaning to. To then throw his body to the wolves and wildcats would be an obscenity and a deliberate one at that. I cannot do it.”

“Then propose something else! Surely you do not suggest that we simply confess to our crime and trust in the tender mercies of the headsman?”

“Not at all. I must flee this very moment and never come back, that I may be blamed fully, and you may remain and claim innocence of the deed,” the second said grimly. “You can tell them that you witnessed it and that I fled before you had a chance to stop me so that there is no doubt left in anyone’s mind. You can say that the blood on your own hands and clothes was a result of you trying to save the man, only to discover that it was too late.”

“And if they catch you?” the first brother pressed. “What then? I will not be able to recant my story! They will expect me to swear to it before God when they put you on trial!”

The other shook his head. “It will not happen. I shall ride fast and far to a place where none know my face. I will change my name and begin anew and leave this place—and this tragedy—behind me forever.” *If I am able to*, he added mentally, *though I fear the face of the dead man will always lurk behind my eyelids, waiting to accuse me.*

“Aye,” the first brother said, his voice choked by grief, “but you will be leaving me as well, and our mother and father.”

“I have no choice in the matter. I must go. And you must not tell our parents the truth of this, do you hear? They must believe in my absolute guilt as all the others must, else this will amount to nothing.”

“They will not believe such a thing of you. They might believe it of me if pressed, but—”

The second brother took the first by the shoulders, looking into his eyes. “You must make them believe. Now, I must flee at once. There is

no more time to waste.”

“I will find a way to see you again, Corncrake. I promise.”

His sibling smiled wistfully at the bird nickname he'd been given by his brother when they were small children and replied in kind, “No, Bonxie, you must let me go. Our parents need you now more than ever before. Be there for them and promise that you will do all that you can to forget about me.”

The one called Bonxie nodded, but he refused to utter the promise aloud, telling himself that it gave him the option of breaking it later without guilt. The two boys had spent almost every waking moment together since the hour of their birth, and it was incomprehensible for either of them to consider a life without each other.

He knew, deep in his heart, that they would reunite someday.

Or at least, he hoped so.

They embraced one last time, and then Corncrake fled to the nearest stable as fast as his legs could carry him, doing all he could to stick to the shadows and keep from being seen. He clearly could not risk taking a mount from their own family, as they lived in the center of the village, and the risk of being spotted would be too great.

*So now I am a horse thief into the bargain, Corncrake thought bitterly. If I manage to escape and find a new place to live, I will have wrongs indeed to atone for. I pray that God will allow me ample opportunities to do so and that His grace is not lost to me forever for what I do this night.*



**A**odh coughed wetly, stirring Sorcha from her light and fitful slumber by his side.

She peered over at his unconscious form, then pressed the back of her hand to his forehead, feeling the fever that burned fiercely there. His veins were still terribly inflamed, dark with whatever foul sickness was consuming him so slowly and relentlessly.

And there was not a thing she could do for her little brother but to watch helplessly and wait for his last breath to escape his lips.

Sorcha noticed that the small book of poetry she'd been reading—or rather, trying to read, in a vain attempt to ward off her anxiety and despair—had tumbled from her hands and onto the stone floor. She leaned over and recovered it, trying to remember which page she'd been on when she had succumbed to her exhaustion.

The door opened, and Edmund entered, his posture as stiff and formal as ever. Sorcha noticed that he was doing a far better job of keeping the sympathy and concern from his eyes when he looked at her, ever since she had yelled at him and told him she was sick of seeing it there.

The senseless outburst had not been fair to him. She had known that even then, and she knew that he did too, that he had graciously stood fast and served as her whipping boy when she'd needed one to vent her frustration and rage.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “My lady, you have not left this room for days. I know the concern you feel for your brother, and none could blame you for that—”

“Except that you are about to tell me the members of the clan *are* blaming me for that, aren't you, Edmund?” she asked wearily.

His lips tightened into a line at her shrewd observation, but he

pressed on. "It is your duty to lead this clan while Aodh is unable to do so. As such, there are numerous responsibilities which must be attended to."

"I have no doubt that you are more than willing to catalog them for me in tremendous detail," Sorchá retorted. "Indeed, since you are so well-versed in them, I see no reason why you should not continue to see to them on my behalf."

"Because I am not a laird."

She scoffed, "Neither am I, remember?"

"No, my lady, but you are a Campbell which, in this case, is the next best thing. You may be assured that in the absence of your direct leadership, other men who are not Campbells have expressed keen interest in assuming control of this clan. The longer you remain sequestered, the more support they muster."

Sorchá scowled. "You speak of Ryan McKenna, no doubt."

"Aye, among others," Edmund affirmed. "Fergus bid me to stay here and look after the concerns of your family as best I can. Please allow me to do so, my lady. Heed my counsel. Or at the very least, tell me why you feel you cannot."

Sorchá sighed. Her back hurt from sitting in the chair for so long, yet she found she could not summon the will to stand and stretch her legs. Everything seemed so hopeless to her in that moment, so far beyond her control.

"Did you hear of the old woman who intruded on this chamber several nights ago?" she began.

"I did," he replied evenly. "I was told that despite her age and apparent frailty, it took several guards to drag her from the premises. A curious thing indeed."

"'Curious' is one way of putting it." Sorchá shuddered. "She was the one who first told me that the illness which afflicts Aodh had spread to others in the village. She said that I was to blame. That it was a curse upon our clan, a divine punishment for being led by a woman instead of a laird."

Edmund frowned. "And you believe this, do you?"

"I do not *wish* to believe it," she insisted. "I would like nothing more than to dismiss it as mere superstition and nonsense! However, I am told each day that the number of afflicted villagers doubles and doubles again! The servants in the hallway outside my door do not

think I hear them when they whisper and fret about how many are attributing this sickness to my leadership!"

Edmund bent to one knee in front of Sorcha's chair, looking into her eyes earnestly. "They are wrong to blame you, for you have no more control over the spreading of this illness than you have over the rising and setting of the sun. However, they might be in a better position to see that if you walk among them, if you visit with their stricken, demonstrate that you are a caring and attentive leader..."

"You truly believe this might change their opinion of me, Edmund?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes." He hesitated for a moment, then added, "And something else, as well. The healers of the castle must be tasked with ministering to the sick in the village."

She peered at him, confused. "Have they not been?"

"No, my lady. Not all of them."

Sorcha's eyes widened incredulously. "You do not mean to suggest that I dismiss the healers who remain to tend to my brother?!"

"I shall answer that question with one of my own," he replied. "Is there anything they have done for Aodh these past several days which you could not do for him yourself? Apply compresses to his forehead and water to his lips, clean and replace his bedclothes, and watch for changes in his condition? Or are such menial tasks beneath you?"

"You *know* they are not, sir!" she retorted angrily.

"Good! Then assume those duties, and let the remaining healers see to the farmers and villagers."

She did not wish to admit it, but she knew that he was right. "Very well. Just give me this one last night, and tomorrow I shall visit with the townsfolk and bring the healers with me. If you feel that these things will raise the clan's spirits and renew their trust in me."

"It could scarcely hurt, my lady," Edmund said, rising to his feet. "Thank you. I will take my leave of you, then, and bid you good night."

He withdrew from the room, and a few moments later, Amelia, the servant girl, entered. She was a pale and scrawny girl with a large nose, close-set eyes, and mouse-brown hair. "May I bring you anything, my lady?" she asked timidly. "Some supper, perhaps? You have taken no food for days now, and you must eat if you are to keep your strength up."

Sorcha gave her a tired smile. "You are very kind, Amelia. But no. I am not hungry. Rather, I believe I will try to sleep."

"Very well." Amelia seemed reluctant to leave her. "In that case, I wanted to give you these." She reached into a pocket of her apron and produced a handful of small blue flowers. "I picked them from the garden. You have not taken the time to collect any yourself lately, and I know how you enjoy wearing them in your hair."

"That was extremely thoughtful of you." Sorcha accepted the flowers, looking down at them. "I have never learned the proper name for these, you know? None who have seen them have ever been able to tell me, yet they grow on the hillsides nearby. Not every year, or even most, but every now and then, like a special treat. As a girl, I called them Angel's Teardrops." She sniffled, wiping a tear from her cheek. "Aodh told me it was a stupid name for them. He said there were no such things as 'angels,' and even if there were, they wouldn't go around crying all over a bunch of Scottish hills. He was so serious-minded, and now..."

But she could not finish. Her grief was simply too great, and it overcame her, causing her to put her face in her hands and sob.

Amelia patted her shoulder gently. "There, there, my lady. He will wake up from this, you shall see. And for what it is worth, not everyone in the clan—or even among the servants of the castle—believes this sickness is your fault. Just a horrid turn of events, that's all."

Sorcha wished she could be as sure of these things as Amelia seemed to be.

The next day, Sorcha roused herself from the chair that had become a kind of prison for her. Her back and legs were terribly sore from being seated for so long, to the point where she actually groaned in pain, hearing her joints creak and snap despite her tender years.

She gave Aodh a kiss on his forehead, still disturbed by the heat radiating from his skin. For a brief moment, she considered remaining by his side after all, just for one more day, she told herself, in case his condition changed. Surely the townsfolk could wait another day to see her?

Except she knew they could not. They had waited long enough, and by all accounts, they had grown restless and angry.

Sorcha touched the sides of her hair to make sure the flowers had stayed in place during the night. Satisfied that they had, she summoned Amelia and asked her to draw a bath and prepare fresh clothes for her.

As she bathed and dressed, Sorcha thought about how a mere two years ago, her dastardly uncle Ronald had been laird over the clan. She had been held in the fortress of another clan during that time (along with her younger sister Freya), but from all she had heard, Ronald had been a cruel tyrant who had forced peasants and nobles alike to work in the fields from dawn to dusk like slaves. It had gone on for years.

Yet, there had been no uprising then. The members of the clan had accepted their fate as placidly as cattle being led to market for slaughter.

Could it be that they had reached their breaking point? That they would turn on her when they had given her vile uncle free rein for so long?

The thought was inconceivable to her that she might be even more hated than he was, her position as clan leader more tenuous. But Edmund had expressed concern, and that was more than enough for her to take the situation seriously.

She had the remaining castle healers meet her at the gates, along with Edmund. Together, they walked toward the village, each one steeling themselves against the horrors and miseries they might encounter when they reached it.

“Are you quite certain we should not bring some of the guards along with us?” Sorcha asked.

Edmund shook his head. “‘Twould send the wrong message, my lady. You are here on a mission of mercy to your subjects, not to intimidate them or make them believe you are frightened of them.”

Those words made her heart feel like a heavy stone had been tied to it. Was she afraid of the members of her own clan? She had not allowed herself to fully consider it before now.

She was not certain that she could, even now.

As they entered the town from one side, a man from another land came to it from the other, whistling a jaunty tune to himself and grandly bidding greetings to every hare and hedgehog that crossed his path. He was called Malcolm Haldane, and he felt it suited him right enough, though he had certainly been known by plenty of other names during his years of wandering.

Over that rather extensive period of time, he had come to fancy himself attuned to the very roads and byways he trod. Each path, every piece of land, every village and farm, seemed to tell its own silent story to those who would only listen—or so he chose to believe. As such, there was always that certain moment when he could feel that he had crossed the invisible threshold from one place to another.

When he did, he performed a small, comforting ritual: He checked to see that his purse was hanging from its accustomed place on his belt (it was, though it was not nearly so heavy as he might have wished); he briefly clutched the tiny leather charm bag that hung from a length of string around his neck, bestowed upon him so long ago; and he wrapped his hand around the handle of the sword at his side.

“Let me be welcomed here,” he murmured to whoever might hear his prayer.

Then he took a deep breath, smiled, and took his first big step into

this new place.

The smile faded almost instantly, for the spirit of this town seemed oddly dismal and unquiet. The hour had the unsettling chill of midnight to it despite the summer sun and cloudless blue sky above, and he shivered, pulling his traveling cloak tighter around him. The shadows in the windows and doorways of the cottages seemed darker and deeper than normal.

The streets were mostly vacant. The shops were closed and shuttered.

A slow dread crept through him, and he knew that the wisest course of action would be to obey his instincts and turn away and find another village that did not make his skin crawl thus.

Except that there was something deeper within him that insisted he must not leave. That this was where he was meant to be at that moment, for reasons that were currently beyond his understanding... but would not remain hidden from him for long.

And besides that, he was in dire need of money.

He doubted he would even have enough to afford both lodging for the night and a decent meal in this place. He had hoped to find some employment here—serving in a tavern, perhaps, or assisting a blacksmith, or working a field or a fishing net. He had done all of these things for income in the past and a dozen more. His strength, skills, experience, and resourcefulness had allowed him to find a job fairly quickly wherever he went and had kept him comfortable until he'd inevitably grown restless and chosen to move on to someplace else.

Looking around, though, his heart sank. How could he find work if no one was open for business?

*Ah, but there's a castle right enough,* he thought, observing the towers of the structure a short distance away. *And castles almost always need guards for their gates and their dungeons. If I go there, perhaps I might find work...and perhaps I might also learn why this village feels like a damned necropolis.*

As he started in that direction, though, he noticed a group of four people approaching. Two of them—a man and a woman—were wearing the finery of nobles. The other two were women, and from the frocks they wore and the handcarts they pushed, he could easily see that they were healers.

He found himself especially struck by the exquisite beauty of the noblewoman.

She was tall, with the long limbs and halting gait of a colt. Her auburn hair was long and straight and threaded with tiny blue flowers, which brought out the striking teal of her eyes. In her fitted white dress with the flowing sleeves and hems, she resembled nothing so much as a porcelain-skinned angel descended from the heavens.

*So these people are from the castle, then, he surmised. That's a stroke of luck, for starters! I can make my inquiries with them.*

Sorcha's eyes were wide, and her face was deathly pale as she walked with Edmund and the healers, feeling the black waves of illness and heartache emanating from every home they passed.

"Which home should we visit first?" she asked hoarsely.

"You may as well choose one at random and begin there," Edmund replied. "I am sorry to say that almost every home contains at least one person who has been afflicted."

Slowly, people were emerging from their houses to gaze and point at Sorcha and calling for their neighbors to do likewise. Within moments, half the townsfolk stood in the streets, muttering to each other, which was quite an inconvenience for Malcolm, as he now had to shoulder her way through them to get to the nobles.

Suddenly, a gruff voice cut through the murmur sharply: "Well now, look who has come to grace us with her presence at last!"

Ryan McKenna strode through the crowd, his figure short yet imposing. He was a stout and stolid man, his iron-gray sideburns braided thickly and tied beneath his wide chin. As usual, he was flanked by Carr and Currie, two other wealthy landowners like himself.

"Lady Sorcha has been at her brother's bedside, as you well know," Edmund retorted archly. "Her family has been blighted by this illness, like many others here."

"Ah, but not quite 'like many others here,' eh?" Ryan observed nastily. "For alas, these good people do not have the wherewithal to retain a pair of healers to live in their houses and be on hand day and night, now do they?"

"You see I have brought them with me now," Sorcha said, trying to keep the anger from her voice. She was already so deeply frustrated and fatigued from seeing the illness devour her brother that her nerves



were frayed.

“You have brought them with you now. I see.” McKenna turned to Carr. “Tell me, how many of our clan have perished in the past two days, Carr?”

“About a dozen,” Carr replied.

McKenna nodded. “There you have it, then. Twelve good men, women, and children who died for want of proper healing, as you selfishly kept the services of these two ladies for your own kin.” He turned to the crowd, raising his voice. “Say what you might about old Ronald, but he knew that the blood and sweat of a commoner was worth no less than that of a noble! He treated rich and poor as equals!”

A rumble of agreement went through the mass of people.

Sorcha could not believe her ears. These same townsfolk had cheered upon their liberation from the tyrannies of Ronald...and now they were cheering his memory?

“Very well,” she said. Her voice was trembling now, no matter how hard she tried to control it. “To cure this malady is not within my power as the head of this clan. I have brought more healers, more supplies. I have come in person to assess the extent of the outbreak, and to see firsthand what more I might offer in aid of my people. Tell me: What more, then, do you ask of me?”

“Do you hear her, my kinsmen?” McKenna sneered to the crowd. “She acts as though she deserves showers of golden praise for carrying out the *barest minimum* of her duties to her clan, and when we *dare* to ask her for greater effort on our behalf, she demands: ‘What would you do, then? How would you lead?’ This is no fit behavior for a true leader—as a *man* in her position would know.”

“So now you blame her for being a woman?” Edmund asked sardonically. “Do you also blame hens for not being cockerels? The last male heir of the clan is indisposed, and she is the eldest Campbell daughter. It follows, then—”

“Perhaps a Campbell is not the answer, then, eh?” Currie offered with a toothy grin. “Perhaps a man from another noble house might take up the reins of leadership while Aodh remains ill. Or longer, if he does not recover.”

“I would wager that your list of nominations for such a fellow consists of a single name, Currie,” Edmund growled, “and that name

belongs to Ryan McKenna.”

“And why not?” Carr demanded. “He has always served our clan with nobility and distinction, has he not? What has her family given us all these years hence, except for ignominy and disaster? Ronald, who slew his own kin? Dand, who lived the life of a brigand and fled to marry a servant girl? Now a plague-stricken child and his feckless sister are to guide us? This instability threatens to tear our clan apart! You must step aside, Sorcha Campbell, and let another lead—one with more wisdom and years, one who will save us from this plight!”

The mood of the crowd was becoming surly and ominous. Sorcha was beginning to grow fearful, and wished that she had insisted on bringing guards with them after all. But how could she have possibly predicted that her own people would turn on her so quickly and spitefully?

Someone in the mob threw an old turnip, which narrowly missed her head.

Another tossed a clod of dirt, which hit her lovely dress, staining it with soil.

Then a stone was launched in her direction. And another. And another.

Before any of these dangerous projectiles could connect with her, though, a tall wooden cart was pushed in front of her and the others who had accompanied her, blocking the thrown rocks and keeping her safe.

Confused, she looked to see who had shoved the cart into place, and when she saw the man responsible, her heart felt as though it had sprouted wings and taken flight.

He was magnificently handsome.

His frame was tall and solid, his shoulders wide and muscular. His high brow and prominent cheekbones were framed by short dark hair and a neatly groomed beard, and his emerald eyes twinkled with mirth and mischief.

“I take it your sightseeing has concluded for the day, my lady,” he said, “and that you intend to return to the castle? If so, I suspect you might welcome an escort!”

“I would,” she replied gratefully. Then she turned to the healers. “You remain here. They will not harm you, and you might be able to do some good.”

“We shall do our best, my lady,” one of the healers replied. “Go in safety and in peace.”

“Neither seems very likely at the moment,” Edmund observed dryly as the green-eyed man pushed the cart, and they crept along beside it.

Once they had reached the edge of the village and the path

before them was clear, they abandoned the cart and walked the rest of the way briskly until they arrived at the gates.

“What is your name, friend, that we may thank you properly?” Edmund asked the man.

“I am called Malcolm Haldane, sir,” he answered with a bow, “and it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure was ours indeed!” Sorcha told him, blushing slightly. “If you had not arrived so fortuitously, there is no telling what might have befallen us!”

“In truth, my lady,” he admitted, “it was my very good fortune to find you in a position where I might demonstrate my usefulness. As it happens, I had planned to inquire as to whether your castle might be in need of a guard.”

Edmund and Sorcha exchanged a glance. “Our ranks have been thinning of late,” Edmund said, “which has been something of a concern. As you may have overheard in the village, our clan is currently wracked with a sickness, one which has afflicted many of our guards.”

“We would be honored to have you,” Sorcha interjected, “though I imagine you might reconsider, given the risk of infection to yourself.”

Malcolm shrugged. “If I choose to remain here, yes, I might perish from this illness. However, if I move along, it is almost certain that I will perish from starvation. Between the two, it seems wisest to take my chances with the plague, does it not?”

“Well, when you put it that way, yes, I suppose it does,” Sorcha giggled.

“Before the matter is decided,” Edmund spoke up, “might I consult

with you for the briefest of moments, my lady?"

Sorcha allowed Edmund to lead her a short distance away. "Yes, what is it?" she asked. "Do you intend to opine that it is a mistake to hire him on?"

"As a matter of fact, based on his earlier demonstration, I believe he will make an excellent addition to our cadre of castle guards," Edmund retorted. "I simply wish to confirm that you are offering him this position for the right reasons."

"What on earth do you mean?"

He raised an eyebrow. "A blind man could tell you are attracted to him. But you know full well that since he is not of noble birth, he would not be a fit consort for you. And since he would be employed as a guard, it would be hugely inappropriate if you were to—"

"Yes, of course, I'm well aware of that!" Sorcha interrupted. "But the fact remains that we require more guards, and here is a man with his wits about him who offers to do the job! I feel it would be foolish to refuse him."

"Very well, my lady," Edmund replied, though he did not sound wholly convinced.

They returned to Malcolm, and Sorcha said, "It is settled, then! Welcome to our employ, Malcolm. Edmund will show you to the barracks of the guards and see to it that you are properly outfitted, and I shall look forward to seeing you patrol the ramparts."

Malcolm bowed. "You are most kind, my lady. You shall not regret this choice, I assure you."

Sorcha gave him a winning smile. "No, I don't suppose I shall."

After this interaction, Sorcha retreated to the room where Aodh rested. She checked his brow once more, changed his bedclothes, and put a cool cloth on his skin. These simple tasks helped to take her mind off what had happened in the village; she was still deeply shaken by the behavior of the townsfolk.

She climbed onto the bed next to Aodh, opened her book of poetry once more, and read aloud to him in the hope that he might hear her and be comforted.

Eventually, the sun set, and Sorcha drifted off, the book slipping from her fingers once more as her head lolled against his. Her dreams were disturbed by images of thrown rocks and angry clan members, of the accusing voice and pointed finger of Ryan McKenna. But then

Malcolm appeared, scooping her up in his powerful arms and taking her far away from all of the strife and tumult.

“S-Sorcha?”

The voice belonged to Aodh, and at first, Sorcha was certain that she was still asleep and dreaming he had awakened. But when she opened her eyes, she found that his were open as well. They were glassy and bloodshot, nearly devoid of all sense, but at least he had regained consciousness after such a dreadfully long time.

“Water, please,” he croaked, his lips dry and cracked.

Sorcha ran to fetch the pitcher from the table across the room and brought it to him, gently pouring some water into his open mouth. He nodded after a few moments, and she stopped.

“How do you feel, Aodh?” she asked earnestly. Part of her was tempted to yell for a servant and ask them to summon one of the healers back from the village, but she was too focused on him to do so.

Aodh shook his head. “I...believe I may be...dying, dear sister. I can feel my...body...failing me by the moment...and I fear...that I do not have much longer.”

“But how can that be?” she asked tearfully. “You are awake! You are speaking!”

“Aye, perhaps,” he answered, his breathing slow and painful. “But...I am not...*healing*, Sorcha.” He put his hand over hers, and she was dismayed to find his touch warmer and more clammy than ever before. “While I slept...I heard...what went on in this chamber. Your sweet voice as you...read to me...and...the voice of an old woman. She was...angry. She blamed this...on...a curse...”

“Superstitious folly,” Sorcha assured him. “You must pay her no mind...”

He coughed, and a few drops of blood pattered onto the sheets and pillows like raindrops. “She may...know more about this malady...than she seems. She may even...have the key...to curing it. You must...try to find her, Sorcha. Not for me...but for the others in the village...”

“But how, Aodh?” she pleaded. “How?”

It was no use, though. He fell into another fit of agonizing coughing, and could speak no more. He could barely breathe.

Just then, Amelia appeared in the doorway, panting and red-faced.

“My lady! Please, you must come at once!”

Sorcha followed her down the corridor toward Freya’s chamber, and she was horrified to hear loud coughing emanating from her little sister’s room as well. She ran as fast as her legs could carry her, and when she got there, she saw that Freya’s veins were as dark and branching as Aodh’s. Her eyes were watering and rolling in her head as she wheezed and rasped.

“No!” Sorcha wailed. “Not her too!”

“I’m afraid so, my lady,” Amelia moaned, wringing her hands. “She woke up this way, and I do not know what to do! Shall I summon the healers from the village?”

Sorcha’s natural impulse was to tell her yes, retrieve them at once, along with all their potions and poultices—anything that might ease her sister’s symptoms even momentarily—before they advanced to the stage that her brother had.

But what good would it do? The healers had attended to Aodh, and he was still in a terrible state. All that calling the healers would do was make the townsfolk feel even more like Sorcha was prioritizing her own family’s needs over theirs.

She felt so dreadfully trapped and uncertain. It felt like no matter what she did, it led to nothing good.

“No,” she said in a small voice. “I shall tend to her, just as I have my brother.”

“Sister, I am so very tired,” Freya said, closing her eyes and laying her head back upon the pillow. “So dreadfully...tired...”

Sorcha felt helpless and torn. She did not want her little sister to succumb to unconsciousness as Aodh had, but how could she stop such a thing, especially if rest was what Freya’s body required in order to fight off the illness?

It became a moot point within moments as Freya’s eyelids fluttered fitfully, and she began to snore.

There was a knock at Freya’s door, and Sorcha turned to see Malcolm standing there. “My lady, I came as soon as I heard about your poor sister. How advanced are her symptoms?”

“Sir!” Amelia exclaimed. “It is most improper of you to abandon your post, just as it is far above your station to show such familiarity to the lady of the house! The health and affairs of her siblings are none of your concern!”

"It's quite all right, Amelia," Sorchia told her evenly. "Please fetch me more water and cloths at once so that I may cool Freya's brow."

Amelia looked from Sorchia to Malcolm and back again. "Very well, my lady," she said uncertainly, withdrawing from the room.

Malcolm seemed taken aback but somewhat amused as well. "Did I overstep my bounds, then, expressing concern for the well-being of the family I have pledged my loyalty and service to?"

"It is not generally our custom to allow our guards to take such liberties," Sorchia conceded, "but since you are new here, and since you obviously meant no offense, I see no harm in it. To answer your question, her symptoms are bad but still appear to be in their early stages."

He nodded. "I have only been on guard duty once so far, and already I have seen several of my peers fall ill."

"And are you feeling any worse for wear?"

"No so far, my lady, thankfully."

Sorchia raised an eyebrow. "Even so, having seen the effects of this sickness firsthand, I suppose you are probably rethinking your decision to remain with us?"

"Quite the contrary, my lady," he corrected her with a grin. "If anything, I believe this is evidence that I am needed here and that fate guided my steps in finding this place...and finding you as well, if I may be so bold?"

"Finding me? What on earth do you mean by that?" Sorchia knew perfectly well what she *wanted* him to mean by that, but she wanted to hear the words come from his mouth.

He put a hand up to placate her. "I do not mean to overstep my bounds! However, I must ask: Do you object to pagan ways and rituals?"

She frowned. "I do not 'object' to them, no. In truth, I rarely believe in them, but given the desperate straits I currently find myself in, well, I suppose I can no longer afford to be skeptical of anything that might help, can I?"

"I am glad to hear you say it. You see, my lady, there is a place not far from here where I spent much time some years ago." As he said this, he reached up to touch the tiny leather bag around his neck. "I obtained this there...a gift of protection from one of the many pagan practitioners who make their home there. It is secluded, as it must be,



to hide them from those who would fear their arcane practices and seek to do them harm.”

“And you believe these people might be able to aid Freya and Aodh?” Sorcha asked.

“I confess, I cannot say for certain. But they are wise in their ways of worship, and more than that, the very earth and air of the place are said to be a bastion of healing to those in need of it. Surely, it cannot do either of them any harm to be taken there for a while in order to find out whether they might be restored to full health?”

Sorcha thought it over. She knew that she should be suspicious of this man who had only just come into her life and now suddenly offered secret solutions to her problems.

But there was an undeniably comforting and trustworthy air about him. And he had shielded her from harm the previous day.

Besides, it seemed to her that she had run out of other options.

Even so, she knew certain precautions had to be taken. Her family had been brutalized too many times in previous years for her to blindly trust any outsider, no matter how much she may have wanted to. She would send him on this errand, yes, but she would send someone else as well, someone she trusted implicitly.

“Very well,” she agreed. “You and Amelia will take Aodh and Freya to this place you speak of and determine whether it will indeed rejuvenate them. If it does, bring them back here at once. Am I right to assume that even if this endeavor succeeds, the people who inhabit this pagan land will hardly welcome a procession of other Campbells in need of their ministrations? Even if we promise to compensate them and offer them the full protection of our clan against any who might seek to harm them?”

Malcolm shook his head. “I would imagine not, my lady. They value their privacy above wealth. Above all else, really.”

“Fair enough. Then at least my poor dear siblings’ lives shall be preserved.” She put a hand on his arm. “You have my deepest gratitude for endeavoring to help us, Malcolm.”

He smiled, and the sight of it was so beautiful that it nearly made her swoon.

“It is my honor to serve a mistress as fair as you, my lady.”

**M**alcolm set off with Amelia early the next morning. Aodh

and Freya were made as comfortable as possible in the back of a simple old wagon, pulled by a pair of swaybacked horses. Malcolm and Amelia were dressed as a pair of simple farmers, and no guards were sent with them.

This was because the less attention they called to themselves, the safer they would remain while on the roads. Or at least, that was what Sorcha tried to tell herself.

Deeper down, she knew the truth: That she dared not let the guards know about this trip, lest they speak of it among themselves. If word of this spread to the other members of the clan, she knew that their resentment toward her would grow tremendously. They would demand to know why these two children were being sent to a potential cure for their ailment, while the other children of the village were left behind to suffer without hope.

Worst of all, some guilt-wracked part of her knew that the question was an entirely valid one. Aodh and Freya were benefiting from unique circumstances. Their wellness was being placed above that of the other villagers.

But Sorcha simply could not afford to care about any of that.

After the untimely death of their parents, Sorcha and her two younger siblings had been sent away to grow up as the unwilling guests—or, more aptly, the hostages—of another clan, one loyal to their pernicious uncle. The three of them had relied on each other fiercely in those years of grief and misery. They had made a hundred oaths and promised to always stand by each other in times of trouble, no matter what.

She owed this to them. She owed them a chance to live.

And more than that: As long as Aodh could draw breath, he remained the rightful laird of the Campbells. She knew he would command the proper respect from the rest of the clan when he became old enough to rule on his own. He was strong and wise, just as their father had been.

He deserved every chance at that future, whatever it took, whatever secrets it forced her to keep from her own people.

"It is only a day's ride from here," Malcolm reassured Sorch a at first light. She and Amelia had carefully lifted the two youngest Campbells onto the wagon, and now Amelia was carefully ladling water into their mouths so that they would not perish from thirst. "We should return quite soon."

"I hope so," she answered. The reasons for that hope hung silently in the air between them, as tangible as the morning mist.

She was seized with a nearly irresistible impulse to kiss him, but she fought it with every scrap of willpower she could summon. It would be inappropriate and futile for all of the reasons Edmund had outlined, to say nothing of the fact that it would be foolhardy (since she barely knew the man) and most unladylike (for much the same reason).

"Keep them safe," she told him earnestly. "And keep Amelia safe, and yourself as well."

His eyes widened in mock fright. "Eh? I thought Amelia was meant to be keeping *me* safe! Good heavens, now I must fear for my safety and rethink this entire endeavor!"

"I do not find you amusing in the slightest, sir," Amelia said.

"That matters little to me," he informed her, "as I find myself humorous enough for the both of us."

"I have no doubt that is true." The servant girl rolled her eyes. "Now, shall we be on our way? Every moment that we tarry increases the risk that we will be seen, to say nothing of the added agony these two dear children must endure!"

Sorch a could not help but snicker, picturing the expression that would doubtless be on Aodh's face if he had been awake to hear himself referred to as "a dear child."

*Then again, he said that he was able to hear everything, even in his unconscious state,* she reminded herself.

"Amelia, will you speak to them during the journey?" she pleaded.

“Will you tell them stories? They will hear you, I assure you, and they will appreciate it greatly.”

“You have my word, my lady,” Amelia promised.

“And what about me?” Malcolm made a joke of sounding hurt as he climbed up onto the wagon and took the reins. “I have plenty of stories too, you know! Better ones than her, I’d wager!”

He flicked the reins, and the horses started forward, forcing Amelia to break into a run to catch up. She climbed onto the wagon next to Malcolm indignantly. “You had best keep your stories to yourself, you...” The rest of her words trailed off as they disappeared over the nearest hillside.

Sorcha watched them go, silently praying that they would reach their destination unharmed and that Aodh and Freya would return from it cured of their ailments.

*And then? she thought. There must be some way for me to be able to parlay that into a cure for all the other members of the Campbell clan who have fallen ill. Otherwise, they will see that I sent my own kin away while theirs were left to suffer, and then they truly will revolt against me.*

*Still, I suppose I am making a great many assumptions, aren’t I? Just because pagans inhabit this secret place Malcolm spoke of doesn’t necessarily mean they will be able to do what he says they can.*

But she could not contemplate that. The thought of her younger siblings enduring this wretched disease until they succumbed to it was simply more than she could bear.

Meanwhile, as the cart bumped and shuddered over the stony road, Amelia said, “So, you fancy her, do you?”

Malcolm raised an eyebrow sardonically. “Freya, you mean? Bit young for my tastes, as it happens.”

“Don’t hand me none of your nonsense, you!” she shot back. “Do you honestly believe I have not seen the way you look at Sorcha?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “She is an attractive woman. I imagine a great many men look at her when in her presence. Why? Would you prefer that I avert my eyes next time?”

“Now you listen to me,” Amelia admonished, jabbing a finger in his face. “The Campbell clan has had more than enough hullabaloo in recent years when it’s come to people seeking romance above their station! Dand Campbell, the eldest heir to the lairdship, was forced to give up his title when he fell in love with a servant girl. Now he lives

the life of a commoner, leaving poor Sorcha with the responsibility of leading our people.”

“Good heavens!” Malcolm marveled. “That is a tale I would not mind hearing in greater detail. I shall have to ask Sorcha to elaborate upon my return.”

“Ask her whatever you please about the matter,” the servant girl said, “only don’t go getting any ideas about wooing her, do you hear? Ever since what transpired with Dand and Maisie, I’ve seen a great many of the castle’s servants and guards suddenly act as if they, too, might be fortunate enough to marry above their stations someday. It is most improper, and I will tolerate none of it from the likes of you! My lady shall have a fitting suitor, one befitting her class and station, not a traveling rogue who will seduce her with his piercing green eyes and bring her more heartache and strife!”

He wiggled his eyebrows at her playfully. “Do you really think my eyes are piercing?”

“Oh, do be quiet, knave!” she retorted, batting his upper arm.

They mostly remained silent for the rest of the journey, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Amelia fretted about the welfare of the Campbells in the back of the wagon and tried to fend off dark thoughts about the future of the clan if those poor children did not survive their current plight. She had seen and heard the attitudes of the clan members regarding Sorcha. They did not seem to have any faith in her ability to lead without a man at her side, and Amelia did not wish to contemplate what might happen if the clan turned against her completely.

For his part, Malcolm thought about romancing Sorcha.

Why not? Was that not what men regularly did—fantasize about the women they wished to be with, even if the chances of such a thing turning out well seemed terribly slim? He had to admit to himself that the tidbit Amelia had revealed about Sorcha’s older brother fascinated him. He resolved to learn more of these matters at his earliest opportunity.

*Not that it will do me much good in terms of wooing the fair lady of the house, he conceded mentally, but a fellow can still daydream, can’t he?*

Their trip was without incident, and by midafternoon, they found themselves riding into a sunlit valley covered with a veritable rainbow of wildflowers. The dreamy and intoxicating smell of them wafted on

the breeze, and a bit of pollen went up Amelia's nose, causing her to sneeze three times. Bees and butterflies danced around the blooms as badgers frolicked in the tall grass. A trickling freshwater brook twinkled and gleamed through the grasses like a ribbon of pure silver, and the horses immediately trotted over to it, drinking their fill.

Amelia's eyes were wide with astonishment. "In my dreams alone have I imagined such a place," she breathed. "However, I see no village, no houses or farms."

"No, of course you don't," he remarked, hopping down from the cart and stretching his legs. "The people who inhabit this land must do so in secret so that their peculiar ways of worship do not attract the attention of those who might persecute them." He cleared his throat, cupped his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice, and bellowed, "Esme! Arabella! It is I, Malcolm Haldane! Fear not my guests, for you have my word that they come in peace!"

Suddenly, the grass shifted in several areas, and to Amelia's wonderment, secret hatches swung open, revealing a series of holes in the ground. Numerous men and women poked their heads up to look at the visitors.

Their expressions were not especially welcoming.

Two women sprung up from the ground and walked toward the cart. They were old and wizened, with large hooked noses and wisps of white hair blowing around their craggy faces. They wore plain brown robes that looked rough and itchy and walked on gnarled wooden canes.

"They may come in peace, Malcolm," the first one said, "but that does not change the fact that they are now aware of our home. If they reveal it to others..."

"Esme, I give you my personal assurance that they will do no such thing," Malcolm reassured her. "We seek your powers of healing. You have my word that I would never have brought anyone to your doorstep if it were not a matter of life and death."

The other one, who Amelia assumed was Arabella, looked her up and down, then sniffed contemptuously. "She appears healthy enough," the woman croaked.

"She is not the one in need of aid, dear lady," he replied, leading her to the back of the cart where the two Campbell children slumbered. "Rather, it is these poor innocents who have fallen gravely

ill.”

Arabella put her bony hand on the youths’ foreheads to check their temperatures, then nodded. “Aye, they are in dire straits, right enough. Indeed, they may be beyond even our ministrations.”

“But you will try, will you not?” Amelia asked hopefully. “The very future of their clan depends upon their survival!”

Esme laughed harshly. “Oh, does it, now? Look around, child. What do we care of clans and their affairs? Involving ourselves in such things has only ever led us to persecution and misery. Aye, we heal their sick right enough... and as soon as they have the strength to stand, they denounce us as witches and druids and call for our heads to be spitted upon pikes!”

“I would never bring such a fate upon you,” Malcolm answered solemnly. “In fact, you may recall that on two separate occasions, I went to great lengths to protect your secrets. As far as I am concerned, this means that you owe me two lives. And so, I have come to collect on behalf of these two unfortunate young people.”

Arabella tilted her head to one side, curious. “And pray tell, what are they to you, Malcolm?”

*A chance to earn the gratitude of their lovely sister, he thought. Gratitude, and perhaps even more.*

Out loud, he said, “They represent their family’s best chance for peace and prosperity. As such, their lives are worth a great deal. Now, will you help them and honor your debt to me?”

“We shall, aye,” Esme told him with a smirk. “We shall even do them the added kindness of allowing them to return to their home once we have done all we can for them...though our custom would normally be to ensure that they never leave to tell our secrets. Thus will our sizable debt to you be repaid at long last, Malcolm. Will these terms satisfy you?”

Malcolm smiled. “Indeed they will, and I am most grateful. Now, there is one final matter for us to attend to.” He turned to Amelia. “You must write a letter to Sorcha letting her know that you and her siblings are safe here and that you must all remain here until these good ladies have taken the necessary steps to cure the children.”

Amelia’s eyebrows went up so sharply that Malcolm thought they might fly off her forehead. “What? You do not seriously intend for me to remain in this strange place while you go back without me?”

“Lady Sorcha will want to know that her brother and sister are being looked after by someone she trusts implicitly,” Malcolm explained. “I’d wager she trusts you well enough since she entrusted you with this errand, whereas she has only just met me and has little reason to take comfort from the news that they were left here with me and a pack of strangers.”

The servant girl’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “No, I think it is more than that. I believe you are returning without me because you desire my mistress and rightly fear that I would do all I could to come between you!”

*I must privately concede that what she says is not far from the truth, Malcolm thought to himself wryly. But there is another purpose as well. One more fit for her ears, I think.*

“When I protected her from the mob in the village,” Malcolm said, “I saw the look of distrust and hostility in the eyes of the people. I have traveled to many lands in my time, and I have seen that look several times before, always before violence and chaos break out, and the balance of power shifts mightily. If such a thing should happen, I would just as soon be by Lady Sorcha’s side with my sword at the ready. Unless, of course, you feel that you are a more proficient fighter? To be fair, I have not seen your prowess with a blade, so I cannot presume to guess at your level of skill.”

Amelia sighed, decidedly unamused. “Very well, then. Give me a pen and paper, and I shall do as you ask and remain behind in this... place.”

“Delightful. And do try not to look quite so glum!” he said with a hearty laugh. “Your surroundings are idyllic, and your hosts will prove tremendously engaging once they get to know you and trust you a bit. By the time you are prepared to return to the castle, I have no doubt that you shall be in fine spirits and in better health than you can ever remember enjoying before! Mark my words, Amelia! You shall see!”



Sorcha stood at one end of the long table in the great hall, feeling like a small child who had been called before her disapproving parents to be harshly chastised for bad behavior.

She tried to remind herself that such feelings did not befit a lady of her position, that she was not a girl anymore but a woman, and the leader of her clan at that. And most of all, that the scowling men who stood opposite her were not parents but merely a greedy old man and the feckless bullies who associated with him.

"There have been disturbing rumors coming from this castle since yesterday morning," Ryan McKenna announced, jutting his rather prodigious chin out accusingly. "Reports of a cart leaving at first light, carrying your servant girl and this new guard of yours."

"The servants and guards undertake many tasks in the running of this castle," Edmund spoke up from his place next to Sorcha. "Most of them are beneath the notice of the lady of the house, and a great many of them involve carts, I should think."

Carr snickered. "That is your response to such a charge?"

"We have yet to *hear* a charge," Sorcha observed. "If it is your intention to make one, I suggest you do so rather than continue to waste my time with these vague and annoying insinuations."

"So you claim, then, to have no genuine idea of where the two might have gone?" Currie asked.

"For all we know," Edmund retorted, "they might have gone off to picnic together in some sunny meadow, which would be no one's business but their own."

"Would it not also be the business of the two children who rode with them?" McKenna challenged. "And since those children were your younger siblings, would that not make it *your* business...and the

business of the rest of the clan as well?"

Sorcha did not know how to respond, and when she glanced over at Edmund, she could see that he was struggling to come up with a suitable answer as well.

"Nothing to say to that?" Currie inquired mockingly. "Do you deny, then, that you sent your ailing siblings—the heirs of this clan—away from here without telling anyone?"

"You see, I happen to have a theory," Carr said. "I think that you learned of a cure, and rather than share it with the rest of the clan, you selfishly chose to keep it for your own loved ones."

"It is a strange and amusing trick indeed, Carr," Edmund remarked casually, "that although your lips move, it is McKenna's voice I hear."

Carr turned bright red and fell silent.

"If I *were* to send my brother and sister away," Sorcha said through clenched teeth, "it would be to keep them as far away from you and your sycophants as possible, for I fear that you intend treachery and bloodshed."

"You fear treachery from *me?!?*" McKenna barked harshly. "For standing before the *wrongfully* appointed leader of this clan and asking perfectly valid questions regarding the welfare and whereabouts of its heirs? What a black joke indeed! I have *ever* been loyal and true in my service to your family! That is why I should have been made steward once Dand stepped aside, not a boy too young to grow a beard or a wee *girl!*"

"That is all quite beside the point, sir," Edmund declared firmly. "Whether you agree with this state of affairs or not, Lady Sorcha was chosen to lead, and it is your duty to support her."

"No, my duty is to the people who *inhabit* these lands, not to the nobles who ignore their needs and blithely watch as their loved ones die!" McKenna slammed his fist upon the table loudly.

"It seems to me that all of this might easily be settled to everyone's satisfaction," Currie sneered. "What if we were to simply go to the chambers where Freya and Aodh slumber and confirm that they are indeed in their beds as you claim?"

"Then I would remind you that you are in my home as a courtesy," Sorcha snapped, "and that only this hall has been made available to you this day. If you choose to go beyond this area without my leave, it will be the sworn duty of my guards to strike you down as they would

any intruder.”

“Is that so?” McKenna leered at her, licking his thin lips. “And how can you be sure that all of your guards still obey you, little girl? How, when they have seen so many of their fellows and family members struck down by this sickness, and all while the ‘lady of the house’ has done naught but sequester herself from her people and read every book in her library twice over?”

Those words felt like a sudden icy rain soaking Sorch, trickling down her skin and chilling every inch of her. It was a horrible point to concede, but she had no choice. How could she have faith in the people who surrounded her each day? After all, at least one of them had told McKenna about the cart’s departure the previous morning.

She had spies all around her. And for all she knew, half of them meant her harm.

“At any rate, I see no reason for us to engage in such a demonstration,” McKenna said briskly. “Or at least, not this day. For now, we shall take our leave of you and this...foppish Brodie outsider who counsels you so poorly.”

Edmund’s face tightened, but he said nothing.

“But make no mistake, lass,” McKenna went on, “your time as leader is swiftly drawing to a close. Soon, your elders and betters will supplant you and restore this clan to all its former glory.”

And with that, McKenna withdrew from the great hall with Carr and Currie close behind.

“The only ‘glory’ I would restore the clan to in this moment,” Sorch snarled once the door had shut behind them, “is that which existed before his odious birth!”

“Take care how you speak, my lady,” Edmund cautioned. “I take your meaning well, but there are those who might think you make light of the plague.”

“Yes, and now I must assume that my every word and deed is being scrutinized from the shadows,” she said bitterly, “and related to that hideous toad and his underlings.”

“That is correct, yes.”

Sorch sighed angrily, smacking her palm against the tabletop (and pretending it didn’t hurt her hand tremendously). “At least I know that Freya and Aodh are safely out of these jackals’ reach. If only I could be as certain that they will heal from their maladies.”

"I must confess, I was surprised when you told me that you had chosen to send them away with this man," Edmund said, "given that he is largely a stranger to us."

"I had no other recourse," she replied sadly. "They were perishing before my very eyes. I was forced to grasp at even the barest sliver of hope and to pray that sending Amelia along was enough to safeguard Aodh and Freya. I suppose we shall soon see whether such a course of action was wise."

Just then, the door to the great hall opened, and Malcolm strode through.

"Good heavens, you have returned so soon?" Sorcha asked, delighted. "Are Freya and Aodh healed? May I see them?"

"Their healing will take a great deal longer than a mere day, I fear," Malcolm answered, taking the letter from within his tunic and handing it over to her. "That is why I bade Amelia remain behind. I assumed you would wish her to watch over them. She wrote this message for you that you might know she is unharmed and staying with them of her own free will."

Sorcha frowned and accepted the letter, scanning it carefully. "This does appear to be her handwriting," she conceded. "And she does not appear to have been coerced in the writing of it. But why, then, did you come back on your own?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "To remain by your side, my lady, during what appears to be a most troubling time for you. I thought you might welcome the safety of my presence."

"And why should she assume that you are to be trusted when you are new to us, and even those who have served in this castle for years now seem eager to betray us?" Edmund asked.

"Well, that's just it, isn't it?" Malcolm said, flashing his most charming smile. "I am a newcomer to your lands, and as such, I have no inherent histories or loyalties with anyone who might be your enemy. My allegiance could, perhaps, be swayed by the offer of riches. But then, since you are the lady of the house, I must assume that whatever offer I am made, you would be in a position to make me a better one."

Sorcha looked at him for a long moment, then threw her head back and laughed. She tried to control her mirth as Edmund looked on, bemused, but every time she thought it was at an end, it seemed to

bubble up within her again until tears rolled down her cheeks.

When she finally caught her breath, she said, "Thank you, Malcolm Haldane! I surely needed that!" She turned to Edmund. "You may take your leave of us now, Edmund."

Edmund looked from her to him and back again, then shrugged mildly and left the room.

"Am I to assume, then, that things have not been harmonious in my absence?" Malcolm ventured.

"More members of my clan have fallen ill," she told him miserably, slumping into one of the chairs at the table. "The healers have come to believe that this sickness originated from a specific well near the center of town, which makes a certain terrible sense. It was just outside the blacksmith's shop, which was where Aodh took his sword lessons from one of the apprentices...and he drank water from it mightily as he exercised. The blacksmith and his son were next to be taken ill, along with others who lived near the well and made use of it, so it stands to reason."

"It has since been sealed off then, I take it?" Malcolm guessed. "The well, I mean?"

"Of course it has. But whatever foul sickness originated in it has now spread far past it, from person to person and home to home. Finding its source has not allowed us to subdue it or to save those afflicted by it. If these people you know are not capable of finding a solution, I fear that every member of our clan shall expire."

"But you have not fallen ill," he pointed out. "Despite spending so much time in the company of your brother, the sickness seems to have spared you."

"Yes," she muttered darkly. "No doubt out of gratitude, since I am the true cause of it."

He frowned, puzzled. "But you just said the well—"

"The well was tainted, yes. As a punishment from the gods, according to a crone named Davina."

Malcolm's eyes widened. "Surely you do not mean the old woman who calls herself 'Davina, daughter of Elspeth'? Staggers about scaring people and delivering dire predictions of doom?"

"Yes, the very same! Do you know her?"

"We have had our dealings here and there," he replied shrewdly.

"And you know her to be a fraudulent hag, then?" Sorchá asked

hopefully. “Her portents and warnings are merely feeble flights of fancy, is that it?”

“I wish I could say that were true. But Davina is a sort of intermediary between the mystics who currently tend to your siblings and the world of men. It has been my experience that her words are best heeded and given weight in order to avoid a grim outcome.”

Sorcha put her head in her hands. “So she spoke the truth of it, then. This plague has occurred because our clan is cursed due to my leadership. Perhaps it would be best if I did step aside and allow that swine McKenna to act as steward.”

Malcolm sat in the chair beside hers and put his hands over hers, lowering them so he could look into her eyes. The way his emerald orbs twinkled at hers offered her much-needed comfort and reassurance. “I cannot speak to the existence of a curse, my lady, or whether you play a part in it. However, I have known plenty of men like McKenna in my time, and I can assure you of this: Once he has power, neither he nor his successors will *ever* give it up willingly, not even to a rightful Campbell heir.”

“Then what am I to do?” she wailed. “Simply sit back and watch my clan die before my eyes?”

“Certainly not. We shall go to Davina and ask her to provide more information regarding this ‘curse.’ Specifically, the most expeditious way to break it.”

“How do you know it can be broken?”

He beamed at her. “My lady, it has been my experience that every curse may be broken if one only knows how. That is the very nature of curses. Take heart! We will find your salvation, I promise you.”

In that blessed and blissful moment, feeling the warmth of his palms against hers, she believed it with all her heart.

**T**his time, Sorcha did not tell any servants that she and Malcolm intended to leave the castle. She did not even confide in Edmund, even though she was utterly certain that he was her ally.

Even the stablehands could not know, in case one of them chose to give the information to McKenna (or to mention it to someone who might, for that matter). Malcolm and Sorcha slipped out of the castle after nightfall and crept to the stables unseen, selecting a pair of horses and saddling them in near-total darkness. They did not even dare to light a candle, for they could not risk the flickering flame being seen from a distance.

*What if someone discovers that I am not in my chamber? Sorcha wondered to herself as she buckled the saddle into place. What will they think has become of me? The entire castle will be in an uproar, poor Edmund will be at his wit's end...and perhaps worst of all, McKenna might become leader at that, as there will be no one left of Campbell lineage to stand in his way. Am I making a terrible mistake? Should I remain behind after all?*

But no.

She could not bring herself to make that choice, not when there was a chance that she might find answers in seeking out Davina's counsel. She would simply have to make sure they returned long before the first light of dawn so that none would discover they were missing or see them return.

If they were spotted, she knew that McKenna would almost certainly accuse her of frivolously gallivanting about—perhaps even in a tawdry dalliance with her new guard—and he would use that to further assault her fitness to lead.

Sorcha and Malcolm rode side by side through the gloom of night.

Whenever the moon came out from behind a cloud and shone its silvery light upon them, Malcolm would motion for them to gallop over to the shadows provided by trees and steep hillsides, making them harder for prying eyes to detect.

Before the darkness swallowed them each time, though, Sorcha could not help but steal a glance at Malcolm, the way the moonlight caught his mischievous eyes, the way it shimmered across the wide contours of his back and shoulders. His short hair bounced around his handsome face, framing the roguish grin that played across his lips.

She wondered what those lips would feel like pressed against her own and became so flustered and distracted that a low-hanging branch rapped her on the forehead, eliciting a grunt of surprise and pain.

"The trees are meant to conceal us, lass, not knock us witless!" Malcolm joked. "How are you to explain a bloody great bruise on your head tomorrow morning, eh?"

"I shall simply tell people I fell out of bed and bumped my head," she replied primly.

He chuckled. "Aye, I can hear that McKenna bastard now." He cleared his throat, then spoke in a gruff imitation of McKenna's voice: "Is *this* who leads our clan now, eh? A wee lass who cannot even manage to sleep in her own bed without injuring herself?"

Sorcha giggled, then affected a McKenna impression of her own. "Our clan is in peril, and what does she do, eh? *Sleep!* And she even has the unbridled temerity to make use of a *bed* for such slothful and shameless activities!"

The two of them laughed long and loud, their preoccupation with stealth momentarily abandoned.

Finally, Sorcha said, "I do not imagine it will be nearly as easy for me to laugh about such things at the point of a sword, will it?"

"Do not lose hope, my lady," Malcolm told her encouragingly. "We shall find a way out of this predicament for you right enough."

"And after that?"

He found himself taken aback by the question. "What do you mean?"

"Let us say you are right, and we are able to restore stability to my clan. What then? Have you considered what your reward should be for aiding me and showing me loyalty? Surely you do not expect to



simply return to the ranks of the guards?”

“I must confess, I had not considered such things, my lady,” he admitted.

This was true enough, and it almost startled him to realize it. In all of his years of roving, he had always sought out opportunities to make his fortune and improve his station in life. However, he had come to this place to obtain employment, and in having done so, he found himself infatuated with Sorchia and determined to protect her in any way he could.

Without even the merest thought of how endearing himself to her might lead to gold in his purse.

Even now that she had brought it up, he was uncertain of how to respond. What should he ask of a woman such as this, other than the things he knew he was not *allowed* to ask for, such as her touch or her kiss?

“Would you consent to serve as the captain of my guard?” she prompted.

Malcolm considered it, still at a loss for words.

He dared not ever hope to win the hand of a noblewoman like Sorchia, and so, he knew in his heart that it would be foolish of him to remain in her service when his desire for her threatened to overwhelm him.

It would surely lead to trouble. And he had spent most of his life trying to avoid trouble whenever possible.

“I think not, my lady,” he replied carefully. “If you wish to reward me for my assistance, you may do so with whatever sum you find appropriate. But the truth is, I am at my best when I am a wanderer. I had intended to serve at your castle for a while and then move on to wherever fate takes me next, as I always have. Were I to become the captain of your guard, I might find myself overburdened with responsibilities that it would prove impossible to extricate myself from.”

“I see.” She sounded disappointed. “Well, as you wish. I shall endeavor to conceive of an ‘appropriate sum’ presently, and I hope it will make your travels all the smoother.”

They rode the rest of the way in silence until they reached a small stone cottage at the farthest edge of the Campbells’ lands. Small rows of turnips, carrots, potatoes, and herbs grew outside. A candle burned

in the window, and the front door was open.

*This old woman rode all this way just to give me that message, Sorcha thought as they dismounted outside her home. But I did not wish to hear it. I did not want to believe that this plague could somehow be my fault...not when I already felt so wretched about being leader in Aodh's stead.*

*So I ordered my guards to carry her down to the front gates and throw her out.*

Sorcha had heard many fairy tales in her childhood, read to her and her siblings by their mother. In them, witches and spirits often disguised themselves as helpless creatures just to test how others treated them.

She had failed that test. Why, then, should she expect this woman to aid her now?

Malcolm reached out and squeezed her hand, as though he could somehow sense her thoughts. "Try not to worry yourself. She's a good woman, if something of an acquired taste."

Sorcha nodded, following him up the path to the front door.

"Come in, both of ye," a quavering voice said from inside. "I've been expectin' ye, right enough. An' yer right tae be uncertain that I'd help ye, lass, given the insult ye heaped on me when last we spoke. Were it not for that lad beside ye, I'd curse ye twice over!"

The woman's words burned in Sorcha's ears, and she was sorely tempted to turn and flee.

Instead, she followed Malcolm across the threshold.

Davina's parlor was nearly pitch black. Only her vague shape could be seen rocking back and forth in a chair in the corner, and only because of the dim glow cast by the single candle. The flame created a pair of yellow pinpricks dancing in the hollows of her eyes and shined on her crooked wet teeth when she spoke. The air smelled of soil, mushrooms, bone broth, and dry ages of dust and decay.

"Thank you for seeing us, Davina," Malcolm said, bowing his head respectfully. "I hope you have been well?"

"I've nae been dyin' of the plague, so all in all, I'd say I've been well enough compared tae some!" she wheezed. "So now the lady believes in such things as curses, does she? Now she comes tae Davina, daughter of Elspeth, in search of answers? An' empty-handed at that?"

Sorcha frowned, confused. "Was I meant to bring something?"

"D'ye mean young Malcolm didnae tell ye, child?" Davina rasped. "When one asks a boon of such a personage as meself, one must bring an offering to avoid givin' offense!"

"I did not bother to tell her," Malcolm said, "because I intend to pay on her behalf."

"Oh, aye? An' what do ye offer me, then?"

He stepped deeper into the room, becoming little more than a living shadow in Sorcha's widened eyes as he leaned down next to Davina and whispered something in her ear.

Sorcha waited, goosebumps marching across her upper arms and chest.

The old woman cackled loudly. "Aye, fair enough, ye crafty bugger!" She settled into her chair more deeply, pulling her shawl around her shoulders. "So, as for the curse ye bear, 'me lady.' As I tried tae tell ye—afere ye had me escorted out, like—it began four hundred years ago, the last time a lady led the Campbell clan."

"You speak of Lady Flora," Sorcha said in a hushed tone. "I have heard tales of her."

"I can well imagine, seein' as how she was the one who lost Dunscaith Castle!" Davina guffawed. "*That'll* get ye remembered, sure enough, an' not with kind words an' roses on yer grave neither! 'Tis the same curse ye now bear, lass...the one that'll cost ye the only remainin' home yer family has."

"Campbell Castle?" she gasped.

The crone nodded. "Aye, child, the very same."

"What must I do to put things right?" Sorcha demanded. "Surely there must be something? Else you would not have traveled so far to warn me!"

"Two options are before ye," Davina croaked. "One is tae retake Dunscaith, an' somethin' tells me if it were as easy as that, it would already have been accomplished. The other is tae marry accordin' tae the prophecy laid down many generations ago: Wed yerself tae one who is a warrior, a wolf-killer, an' a king. Now go an' dinnae trouble me again. Our dealings are done for good an' all, an' if ever ye seek this house again, ye shall nae find it here."

"You have our deepest gratitude, Davina, daughter of Elspeth," Malcolm said with a deep bow.

Then he took Sorchas hand and led her out the door.

“Do not look behind you,” he cautioned under his breath. “We must simply mount our horses and ride off without a single glance backward. Do you understand?”

“No.”

“But will you do it?”

“Yes.”

However, as they rode away, Sorchas weakened at the last moment and risked a glance over her shoulder.

The place where the cottage had been now stood vacant.

“**W**hat did you say to her?” Sorcha asked as they rode

side by side. “To make her tell us about the curse?”

“Ah, yes, that,” Malcolm snickered. “I told her the true name of a woman she bitterly despises.”

She tilted her head, bewildered. “True name?”

“In the circles she travels in, true names are powerful things and rarely given freely,” he explained. “Once a person’s true name is revealed, others may use it to curse or control them. Davina’s true name is not Davina, any more than her mother’s true name was Elspeth. Perhaps all that sounds silly to someone like you.”

“It does, a bit, yes,” she admitted with a small laugh. “So am I to assume, then, that Malcolm Haldane is not your true name?”

“Not quite. But it suits me well enough, don’t you think?”

“I suppose.” She paused for a moment, then asked, “Would you tell me your true name?”

The question surprised Malcolm so much that he pulled up on the reins and his horse stopped short, nearly throwing him forward. Sorcha pulled up sharply next to him.

He recovered quickly, giving her that damnably endearing smile of his and tossing her a wink as well. “Someday, perhaps, if we continue to get along so well.”

She wanted to believe him, but somehow, she doubted that he meant it. She suspected he had simply said it to throw her off guard and distract her.

“For now, though,” he went on, coaxing his horse forward once more, “perhaps we should speak of Davina’s prophecy. Do you mean to take it seriously?”

He was doing his best to sound casual, but Sorcha detected an

inquisitive edge to his tone.

"I suppose I must," she mused. "I have no particular interest in marrying, but I imagine it would have become a consideration eventually. A warrior and a wolf-killer...well, that certainly seems easy enough since many men are warriors and any of them might kill a wolf if they please, wouldn't you say? And my family would have expected me to wed a nobleman no matter what, but a king? That seems altogether impossible, does it not? Scotland has had no king for quite some time, and it's hardly likely I would marry the king of some other country! Can you picture me as queen of Spain, perhaps? Or France?"

Sorcha was amusing herself tremendously with such comments, but when she turned to look at Malcolm, she saw that his face was oddly inscrutable. His mouth was shut tight, as though he were afraid that if he opened it, he might betray some dreadful secret.

"What is it?" she asked. "Is something the matter?"

He took a deep breath as though steeling himself against some unpleasant task. When he spoke, his tone was oddly stiff. "Quite the contrary, I think, my lady. I believe I know one who would fulfill the prophecy...one whose clan would benefit greatly from a union with your own, just as yours would."

"Oh?" Her curiosity was piqued. "And who might that be?"

"Laird Nathan Fraser," Malcolm replied quietly. "He has always been known as a fierce warrior, ever since he rode into battle at his father's behest. He earned the nickname of Wolfbane when he slew a wolf as a young boy."

"Yes, but surely he is not a king?" she ventured.

"It has been said that his branch of nobility extends from the royal bloodline." Malcolm seemed visibly uncomfortable, but he pressed on. "It isn't much, perhaps..."

"...but it's as close as I shall probably find myself to fulfilling the prophecy," Sorcha finished. "And here you are, come from nowhere and so suddenly, telling me of this. Which makes it all the more likely that it applies to this situation. Everything seems to come together so perfectly, doesn't it?" She gave a weary and halfhearted laugh.

"You could say that, my lady, yes," he acknowledged as the castle came into view. The faintest pink and blue streaks were appearing in the east; they had made it back just in time.

As they returned their horses to the stables, Malcolm asked, "Shall I bring you to Laird Nathan, then, and make an introduction?" He sounded uncertain, as though he was afraid to hear the answer.

"Allow me to take the day and consider it," Sorcha answered. "And will you permit me to speak with the captain of the guard and tell him that you will be indisposed today so that you may get some well-deserved rest?"

He favored her with a tired grin. "No need for that, my lady. I am quite accustomed to going without sleep, and I can assure you that last night's adventure will not hinder my duties today in the slightest."

"I am gratified to hear it," she said, smiling back at him. "I, for one, feel far safer when I know you are walking the ramparts. Only do try not to nod off and fall from the walls?"

"You have my solemn word," he chuckled.

Malcolm did not succumb to his exhaustion during his guard duties; however, he did find himself greatly distracted, wondering whether he had done the right thing in telling her about Nathan.

*"Laird" Nathan*, he corrected himself sourly. *Do not forget how very far he's come since last you saw each other.*

He had tried not to let his resentment fester within him all these years.

He had not always succeeded in this endeavor.

Now, for the first time since he could remember, he found himself entranced by a woman, captivated, utterly bewitched. And not only could he not pursue her himself, but he was also prepared to lead her directly into the arms of Nathan, of all people.

*How can I truly be contemplating such a thing?* he asked himself, reporting to the armory for his crossbow, quiver, and protective garb.

But as he yawned, rubbed his eyes, and took up his post on the outer wall, Malcolm knew full well why he was doing it: Because he had seen so many strange mysteries in his travels that he dared not ignore what Davina had said about how the curse might be broken.

And he did not want Sorcha to lose her home and clan to McKenna, even if it meant that he would never know the sweetness of her touch.

*Not that I ever would have to begin with*, he reminded himself. *She is a noblewoman, after all, and I am merely a wandering scoundrel.*

Still, the melancholy prospect of it made his heart ache fiercely as

he went about his patrols.

For her part, Sorcha bid the servants not to disturb her until the afternoon, giving herself time for a good long nap so that she might recover from the previous night's endeavors. But her sleep was fitful as the old woman's words rang in her ears.

Would she be able to marry this "Nathan"? And even if she did, would that ensure that the curse would be lifted, or was she silly to think that such superstitions might prove true?

*What if I agree to wed him, and the plague retreats on its own during the course of our engagement? she lamented inwardly. What if he turns out to be ugly and hateful, and it is too late for me to break our contract of marriage without provoking a war with his clan? What if...*

*No, go ahead and admit what you truly fear, Sorcha: What if you marry him needlessly, only to discover your true love later on? You will find yourself a prisoner of a union you agreed to in a moment of wild desperation, based on witchery and nonsense!*

Try as she might, though, she could not shake off the notion that she was meant to go with Malcolm in search of the curse's undoing.

She decided that she needed to hear the opinion of someone she trusted.

When she rose from her rest, she went to the stables, selecting the same mare she had taken out the previous night. The horse seemed happy to see her again, and Sorcha felt a peculiar sense of time folding in on itself as she saddled it just as she had hours before. She assumed it was simply because she had been deprived of a good night's sleep and resolved to get to bed all the earlier that night to make up for it.

First, though, she rode to a humble farm on a hillside within the borders of the Campbell lands.

As she dismounted in front of the main house, the door opened, and Dand stepped out. His wife Maisie emerged after him, holding their infant daughter in her arms. Both of them smiled and called out, waving to her happily.

However, she could not help but notice that both of them came no closer and that there was a wary stiffness to their postures, as though they were afraid she might approach them.

"Sister, it is so wonderful to see you," Dand began. "I wish I could embrace you as I would like, truly. But with the plague which has



been spreading in the village and the castle..."

"We cannot risk the health of our child, my dear Sorcha," Maisie said sadly. "I hope you understand."

Sorcha nodded, feeling mildly ashamed of herself for not having considered such things prior to her visit. "You are correct in your caution, of course. I would not risk your lives, or that of your child, for anything in the world. May we speak if I remain here?"

"Certainly," Maisie replied, visibly relieved. "And may I say, at least you look untouched by that dreadful sickness!"

"I seem to be thus far, yes," Sorcha confirmed. "I thank heaven for it, though I wonder why I am so fortunate when so many others are not. In truth, that is part of why I have come to visit this day. I have a difficult decision to make, and I require your counsel."

She related the entire tale to them, and they listened carefully. When she had finished, Dand and Maisie exchanged a worried glance.

"That...is quite a difficult situation," Maisie confirmed. "I would hate to see you throw away your future chance at true love in the name of some old woman's frail wits and unsubstantiated rumors of royal blood."

"You make a good point," Dand said grimly, "but I know only too well what strange and awful responsibilities come with leadership over a clan. She must do what is best for her people, even if it is not what is best for herself. And if she can bring stability to the Campbells by marrying this laird..."

"Presuming that this course of action does bring stability," Sorcha pointed out. "What if the curse is not real?"

"Then you will have allied yourself with a clan that can send additional healers and supplies," Dand pointed out. "One whose ranks of warriors will strengthen your own if conflict should occur. A useful thing indeed, when so many of your kinsmen will have died from this plague. More swords and shields at the ready. More crops to supplement your own when your farmers are fewer."

"You feel I should proceed with this, then?" Sorcha said.

"I feel you should go and meet with this Laird Nathan," he affirmed. "If he is an ogre, then you can return having done your best. If he is a viable groom, then..."

"I see. Thank you, Brother. Your input has aided me immensely."

He smiled. "I'm glad. And do not despair, sweet sister. No matter

what course of action you decide on, you will still have our unconditional and everlasting love and support.”

Sorcha nodded gratefully. “Thank you, Brother. And you as well, my darling sister-in-law. Hopefully, the next time we see each other, I will be able to hold that child in my arms.”

“At the rate he is growing,” Maisie said, “he will be able to hold you in *his* arms next time!”

Sorcha rode back to the castle, considering Dand’s words carefully. She knew that he believed in her ability to lead the clan; he simply did not believe in the clan’s ability to follow, given how unenlightened they were when it came to women leading them.

*Not that Great-Grandmother Flora made things especially easy for the women who came after her*, Sorcha thought with bitter amusement.

When she stabled her horse and walked the rest of the way to the castle, she found Edmund waiting for her at the front gates. His expression was deeply troubled. “I regret to inform you, my lady,” he said with a grimace, “that Ryan McKenna seeks an audience with you once more, as do the ever-present barnacles who cling to his sides so stubbornly.”

“I do not suppose that he would politely remove himself from my home if I were to tell him I did not grant such an audience?” Sorcha guessed.

“I cannot say,” Edmund replied, “but given his demeanor, I would not recommend testing such a theory. Better to hear him out and have it over with, even if it’s the same load of condescending, vaguely-threatening ballyhoo that he’s spouted several times before.”

“If he is so concerned with how I am leading this clan,” she grumbled, following him to the great hall, “perhaps he should be granting me adequate opportunity to do so, rather than needlessly wasting my time with his posturing and bloviating.”

“So!” Ryan McKenna said briskly when she entered the hall. “More errands involving your dashing new guard, eh? Ones which require the privacy of moonlight?”

“You seem to have quite a surprising degree of knowledge regarding the comings and goings of this place,” Edmund remarked. “Almost as if you had people in the castle spying on your behalf.”

McKenna smirked. “I have walked the corridors and courtyards of this place since before you arrived here, interloper; indeed, since long

before this wee girl was born. The very stones whisper their secrets to me.”

“Well, despite what you may have heard by pressing your ear to a bunch of stones like some sort of bloody lunatic,” Sorch a informed him, “the nocturnal errand you speak of was in service to the clan.”

“Oh?” McKenna spread his arms invitingly. “Do tell.”

“If you are so learned in the affairs of my home,” she said, “then you might have heard about the old woman who presented herself in Aodh’s chamber a short while ago.”

“Aye, I heard about that right enough,” he conceded, narrowing his eyes.

“She told me that her name was Davina, daughter of Elspeth, and she accused me of bringing this plague upon our people,” Sorch a went on. “She said it was a curse, one that originated four centuries ago when Dunscaith Castle was lost under the leadership of my ancestor Lady Flora.”

“A most tragic turn of events, to be sure,” Carr spoke up, “and proof indeed that members of the fairer sex ought not lead our clan.”

The comment stung, but Sorch a let it pass. “My guard, Malcolm Haldane—who, as you pointed out, is new to my service—had knowledge of where the old woman might be found. He took me to her so that I might learn how this curse can be broken and the sickness dispelled.”

“Oh?” McKenna raised one of his bushy eyebrows. “And what did she say?”

“She agrees with you that a lady must not lead the Campbell clan. She has told me of a prophecy by which I can return us all to our former health and prosperity: I must marry at once, and the groom in question must be, in her words, a warrior, a wolf-killer, and a king.”

“What a lot of rubbish!” Currie scoffed. “There are warriors and wolf-killers in these lands by the bushel, and many among them have noble blood in their veins. But a king? No such thing exists anymore!”

“Not in the most literal terms, perhaps,” she continued, “but I have heard from Haldane that there is a laird not far from here who is rumored to be descended from the last king: Laird Nathan Fraser.”

Carr burst out laughing. “Preposterous! You believe a betrothal will cure this clan’s ills and that it ought to be based upon a bunch of prophecy and gibberish? This is what happens when a little girl and

her flights of fancy are trusted with the running of a noble house!"

"Be silent, Carr," McKenna growled, his eyes narrowing.

Sorcha did not care for the expression upon his wide face one bit. Whatever scheme he was concocting, she highly doubted she would be pleased with it.

"I do not pretend to put stock in fairy fables and fantasies," he began slowly. "However, one thing that you have said makes a great deal of sense to me indeed: If you were to marry and the affairs of the clan were thus run by your husband instead of yourself, then it might be possible for our clan to be pulled from this predicament. Women are not fit to lead and never have been. Lady Flora was ample proof of that."

"If you have a point, sir," Sorcha interjected icily, "I suggest you make it."

"My point, girl, is this: You ought to marry me."

"What?" Edmund blurted out incredulously. "Surely you cannot be serious!"

"Oh, but I am," McKenna said silkily. "I know the affairs of this clan better than any man alive, and I am best equipped to see to them. I have the ear of the people, and I can quell their frustrations once they see that new leadership is at hand."

"Hardly the most romantic of proposals, is it?" Edmund muttered darkly.

For her part, Sorcha was still in a state of shock from his words. When she had composed herself, she said, "I offer this proposal in return: Allow me to go and meet this Laird Nathan at once. If I do not choose to wed him, or he rejects my offer of marriage, then I shall return and marry you instead."

McKenna tilted his head. "Why should I agree to such a thing? I am a man, I am here, and I am clearly best suited for the position."

"Because I feel I should entertain the option of uniting the Campbells with another powerful and respected clan, thus adding their resources to our own," Sorcha countered. "And more than that, because I happen to find you detestable."

He threw his head back and roared with laughter. "Well, I suppose I shall not have to concern myself with whether you are hiding the truth of your thoughts and feelings from me, at least! So be it, then. Make your journey. But I would urge you to make the utmost haste if

you wish to have a castle or clan to return to.”

And on that menacing note, McKenna took his leave, followed by Carr and Currie as always.

“Do we think that his comment was in reference to how quickly the plague is spreading,” Sorchu asked, “or a threat of further turning my clan against me in my absence?”

“Both, my lady,” Edmund replied. “With rather an emphasis, I think, on the latter. I must confess, I was most surprised to hear you suggest that you would consent to marry that dreadful man.”

“I surprised myself with it as well,” she admitted. “However, I needed time to go and acquaint myself with this Laird Nathan, and this seemed like the best way to get McKenna to loosen his grasp on me in the short term.” She sighed, frustrated. “Now I can only hope that I find the laird of the Fraser clan to be a decent enough sort, for, in truth, I’d marry the devil himself before I gave my hand to that pompous toad.”

“S o, how well do you know this Laird Nathan?” Sorcha asked.

They had been riding side by side for several hours. Sorcha had been lost in thought, and Malcolm had felt it might be best to leave her undisturbed. He knew that she had much to fret about between the situation back home and the prospect of marrying a man she had never met before.

*Then again, I have many conflicting feelings to untangle as well, he reminded himself. Now that I have told her of Nathan, there is no going back. Naturally, I must hope that they wed and that such an event lifts the curse Davina spoke of.*

*I must hope that, else I admit to myself that I have made a terrible mistake in forfeiting this woman I am bewitched by to another man. A good man, perhaps, in his way, but even so...*

And now this question. How much could he dare to confess to her? After so many years, could he even bring himself to talk about it?

He supposed he had to, for her sake. No matter how difficult it might be for him.

“What I am about to tell you,” he began, “I have never revealed to anyone my entire life. However, you have every right to know precisely how I am acquainted with this man who might be your groom. I must ask, however, that you guard my secret well once you have heard it, for to do otherwise might well condemn me to death.”

“Good heavens, such a dire answer to such a simple query.” Sorcha was clearly trying to sound amused, but Malcolm could hear the anxiety beneath her tone. “Very well, you have my word.”

He hoped that he could trust her to keep it, but at this point, he supposed he had little choice in the matter. “Recently, you asked

whether Malcolm Haldane is my true name. It is not. Once, long ago, I was called Marcus Fraser. I was brother to Nathan.”

Sorcha frowned. “Why should that be a secret?”

“I was forced to flee at a young age,” he told her, “while my brother remained behind.”

“What happened?”

Malcolm looked at her with an expression so stricken with grief that it almost frightened her. “I beg of you, my lady, do not ask me that.”

She nodded. “Fair enough. I apologize for upsetting you so.”

“It is not your fault,” he answered. “I have lived with the shame of it for long enough that one might think it would no longer bother me. Alas, such is not the case. At any rate, I can assure you that when I knew him, Nathan was more than a brother to me; he was my dearest friend. A bit careless with his words sometimes, perhaps, and oblivious to the feelings of others here and there, but that is true of so many who are noble-born. Present company excluded, of course, my lady,” he added hastily.

Sorcha laughed lightly. “It’s quite all right. I suppose the same could be said of me as well from time to time.”

“I have seen no evidence of that, though your humility is duly noted,” he replied with a grin. “Come, we ought to stop and rest for a short while. We still have quite a journey ahead of us.”

Meanwhile, as they tended to their homestead, Dand and Maisie heard hoofbeats thundering toward them. They looked to the crest of the nearest hill apprehensively, hoping that whoever approached would not venture too close.

It was Carr, riding with three of his kinsmen. One of them pulled a small cart behind him.

They came to a stop in front of the cottage, and Carr sniffed the air, grinning with his gray and broken teeth. “Ahh, ‘tis a beautiful day indeed, is it not? The sun shines, the birds sing, and the breeze carries the sweet scent of the wildflowers down the hillside and all the way to town! A lovely perfume, to be sure! I simply *must* find occasion to ride up here more often.”

Dand looked up at them, shielding his eyes against the glare of the midday sun. “Hello, good sirs. Do you have some business with us? If so, we are at your disposal, as long as you do not draw near to us.”

"We have an infant," Maisie added, "and we must protect her from the sickness which has ravaged the castle."

"Then I fear I have regrettable news for you, lass," Carr sneered, "for 'tis the castle you and yours shall be going to. Or, more accurately, its dungeons."

"What?!" Dand balked. "What is the meaning of this? We have done nothing wrong!"

"Not yet, perhaps," Carr retorted. "But Ryan McKenna has plans for this clan right enough, and he is most concerned that you might try to interfere with them, seeing as how you're a Campbell with loyalty aplenty to those mewling brats you call kin!"

Maisie gasped and clutched her chest, running back into the house.

Dand's eyes smoldered with rage as he stared Carr down. "You will stay away from my family and ride off at once."

"Oh? Or what?" Carr crowed mockingly. "Unless you have a sword stowed up your fundament for emergencies such as these, lad, I'd not go making idle threats if I were you. And even were you armed, you are outnumbered three to one."

"Two to one," Maisie corrected him, emerging from the cottage with a large knife. "You will not take my child to a disease-ridden dungeon. I care not if there are a *hundred* of you!"

"Maisie. Put the knife down."

The tone in Dand's voice brought her up short, and she turned to look at him. His shoulders slumped, his eyes filled with quiet resignation.

"Surely you do not mean for us to allow ourselves to be taken in such a fashion?" she protested.

He nodded slowly. "He is correct. We cannot fight them, and I would rather risk the possibility that our child will fall ill in the dungeons than the certainty of her being put to the sword for our disobedience. We must go with them and accept our fate."

Maisie's face crumpled in sadness and horror, but she could tell from the expression on his face that he would brook no argument in this matter.

"A wise choice indeed," Carr said. "Now, if you will be so kind as to climb onto the cart we have brought along, we will transport you to the castle at once. I will give you this one warning: If either of you attempt escape, both of you will lose a leg. And the child might too if



you force us to chase you for long. Do I make myself understood?"

They nodded and brought their infant to the cart. Tears were streaming down Maisie's face, while Dand's pallor belied his stoicism.

It was a surreal feeling for both of them, being wheeled through the castle gates as prisoners with the eyes of everyone upon them. How many years had Maisie been a servant girl here? How many years had Dand spent playing in this courtyard as a young boy before the parents of the Campbell siblings had died?

They had fallen in love within these very walls.

Now they were trapped within them.

The guards in the dungeons could scarcely hide their expressions of surprise and discomfort at seeing the former laird of the clan and his wife led to a section of the dismal place with their infant.

"Unlike most of the prisoners kept here, the two of you will not be chained to the walls so that you may care for your child," Carr announced, as though he was conveying the most magnanimous of favors upon them. "However, once more, I shall issue a warning which I do not intend to repeat: If you make trouble while you are down here, you will be shackled, and your baby can fend for itself against the rats in this place."

Dand nodded miserably, and Carr took his leave.

Maisie immediately began to fuss over the baby. "Oh, if she falls ill from this, Dand, I do not know *what* I shall do!"

"This may sound passing strange," Dand mused, "but it is entirely possible that where the plague is concerned, we might be safer here than we would be anywhere else in the castle. After all, there are few people down here, most of them spaced far apart, and there are not many comings and goings."

"Even so, I was surprised to see you surrender to them without a fight," she fretted.

"I meant what I said about our chances against them if we had resisted. Not only that, but we do not yet know what is afoot here or how we might best play our part in it. Our momentary cooperation has bought us time so that we may assess our situation and decide how we might aid my sister in what is clearly her time of greatest need."

But as he spoke the words, even Dand was uncertain of whether he would be able to do anything to help Sorcha. He knew full well how

thick these stone walls were and how impossible escape would be.

*At least Freya and Aodh are far from here, according to what Sorcha told us, he thought to himself. Hopefully, the distance will keep them safe from all of this madness.*

Meanwhile, Carr returned to the estate of Ryan McKenna and reported his mission a success. “Do you wish anything further of me at this time?” he simpered.

“Aye,” McKenna replied stonily. “Learn all you can of this Laird Nathan Fraser and the affairs of his clan. Surely there must be some hidden shame or weakness we might exploit to our advantage.”

“As you wish, sir,” Carr promised with a toothy grin.

Once Malcolm and Sorch a had tied their horses to a tree and settled down on the grass to rest, it had not taken either of them long to doze off beneath the languid summer sunshine, sung to sleep by the fiddling of the grasshoppers in the field. There was a loch nearby, and likewise, the sound of its waves steadily lapping against the shores made for a delightful lullaby.

Neither of them had planned to slumber. If they had, Sorch a had no doubt that Malcolm would have insisted that they take turns so that one of them might keep watch for bandits or other threats. As it was, they had simply succumbed to all of the travel and worry they had been subjected to in these recent days.

Sorch a dreamed of a Castle Fraser with shimmering gilded towers that stretched high above the clouds themselves. The waters of its moat were filled with silver coins, which, in the peculiar logic of dreams, coalesced into the scales of giant fish swimming in impossible patterns. Its ramparts were lined with thousands upon thousands of guards, all of them smiling and welcoming. She dreamed of a Laird Nathan with a hundred different faces. Some of them were fair, while others were foul. One of them was even the hateful visage of her dead uncle Ronald for reasons far beyond her understanding.

And another of them was the face of Malcolm.

She told herself that this last image was perfectly natural. After all, since the two of them were brothers, might they not also be alike in appearance? But deeper down, she knew that such an image obviously represented her desire for Malcolm—her fervent yet hopeless wish that she might simply choose *him* to marry, for she had never been so taken with a man before in her life.

In her dream, the laird with Malcolm's face drew nearer to her and

stroked her cheek, looking deep into her eyes with his piercing green orbs. As he leaned forward, she felt his hot breath on her face, the pressure of his body against hers... She parted her lips, eagerly awaiting his kiss...

Then she opened her eyes and woke, and her blood froze in her veins. A scream rose in her chest and lodged in her throat, and she nearly choked upon it.

She was face-to-face with the gray muzzle of a wolf, its fetid and carnivorous breath blasting against her skin like a blacksmith's bellows.

From this vantage point, each of its fangs looked to be the size of a sword. Its yellow eyes stared into hers with curiosity and hunger, and a growl rumbled from deep within it. Its huge paw hovered over her face, its hooked claw faintly brushing against her forehead.

She dared not move. She dared not make a sound, knowing that it would take a matter of seconds for the animal to rip her to pieces if it was frightened or disturbed.

Then again, she knew that it could just as easily eviscerate her if she remained still, depending on how long it had been since the creature had eaten.

Sorcha was suddenly keenly aware of how exposed and vulnerable the soft flesh of her throat was.

The wolf bared its teeth menacingly, the growl growing even louder and more insistent, as though it could sense her thoughts.

She wished she could risk a glance over at Malcolm to determine whether he was still asleep or if he was there at all. If he had gone down to the edge of the loch to bathe or relieve himself, then perhaps he might see what was happening on his way back and save her.

Except that she could not look away from the wolf's eyes. She dared not, for she was certain that the moment she did, the creature would sink its teeth into her.

The moments seemed to stretch into infinity, with Sorcha keeping every muscle in her body so still that they soon began to cramp. She wondered how long she could remain motionless before she twitched the wrong way and paid a gory price for it.

Suddenly, a small silver blade flashed through the air and embedded itself in the side of the wolf's head. It yowled in agony, tumbling off Sorcha's chest and onto its side. Sorcha, seized by fear

and reflexes, leaped to her feet and put as much distance between herself and the animal as possible, never taking her eyes off it for fear that it might choose to follow her.

But the beast seemed focused on the one who had thrown a dagger into the side of its head. Blood filled its angry golden eye, oozing down its muzzle and settling between its rows of horrid teeth. It whined and snarled, shaking its head as though trying to dislodge the knife.

Then it lunged at Malcolm, determined to inflict revenge.

Sorcha's heart plummeted as she watched the wolf launch itself at her savior. Malcolm's sword was sheathed; there was no way for him to draw it before the animal closed the distance.

As it turned out, he did not need to.

The creature leaped, and Malcolm ducked, producing another dagger from his sleeve with the speed of a lightning strike. He flicked the blade across the wolf's throat and rolled to one side, then recovered in a crouch, prepared to face it once more.

The wolf, however, was quite finished.

It staggered forward a few more steps, choking, its blood staining the grass beneath it. Then its eyes rolled up into its head, and it slumped onto its side, dead, its red tongue lolling out.

Panic caught up with Sorcha, and her entire body began to tremble violently, her teeth chattering. Malcolm strode over to the wolf and retrieved his thrown knife from the side of its skull, wiping it on the grass before he slid it back into a sheath at the back of his belt.

"How many of those do you carry on your person?" she asked.

"In truth, my lady, I have long since lost count," he replied with a crooked grin, walking over to her. "I daresay I have daggers hidden in every nook and cranny of my body that you might imagine...and a few you might prefer not to."

A laugh escaped Sorcha's lips, followed by a sob. Her fright was overcoming her—not just from having been threatened by a wolf, but from McKenna and the plague and the angry mob and all of it.

"There, there," Malcolm soothed, putting his arms around her and rubbing her upper arms briskly. "I have felt enough fear in my life to know that it comes on cold. Take deep breaths and think warm thoughts, my lady, and it will pass right enough."

"You may call me Sorcha, you know," she said in a quivering

voice. "I am quite certain you have earned the right to do so."

His mouth tightened into a grim line, and he released her, even though she most definitely did not wish to be released. "No," he responded quietly, "I believe it would be best for me to keep addressing you as my lady. To keep from...confusing things. You understand."

She wished she could pretend that she didn't so that she might press him to say more, to confess his feelings for her so that she might be prompted to do the same. She wished the two of them might continue to ride together without ever looking back. That she might find happiness far removed from the responsibilities of leading a clan, as her brother Dand had.

But she knew it was not possible. Her people were depending upon her. If Davina was to be believed, only Sorcha could lift this plague.

"Yes," she said softly. "I understand. I suppose we had best continue on our way, then."

"Er, before we do," he replied wryly, "might I clean this blood off my person? It does give me a manly air, and I have no doubt that it will be a compelling cause for conversation should we encounter anyone on our travels. Plus, well, I'm quite fond of the color. It's just the smell, you see, is most revolting, and it's rather sticky besides."

He had a point. The creature had bled on him a great deal indeed when he'd slashed its throat.

"Of course," she said, blushing. "By all means."

"Thank you. I shan't be long." Malcolm walked toward the edge of the loch, whistling to himself.

The moment he was out of her line of sight, Sorcha felt herself begin to shiver again, gripped by sheer terror. Though there were no wolves in view, her eyes saw packs of them closing in on her from all sides, their muzzles snarling and foaming.

Her rational mind told her that such visions were untrue. But the more primal voice beneath it insisted that a predator could easily savage her before her screams traveled to the shore of the loch and compelled Malcolm to return. She dared not remain so far from him in case the worst occurred.

*But he requires privacy when he bathes, you wicked girl!* she thought, blushing fiercely. *If he were to see that you followed him...*

Then he would *not* see, she decided. She would be as stealthy as it

took to avoid detection and to ensure her own safety. It was the only reasonable course of action, she told herself. She *had* almost been devoured by a ravening beast just moments before. No sane person could expect her to remain on her own, unguarded, unarmed.

She crept to the shore on tiptoe, keeping behind rocks, stumps, and tall grasses whenever possible. At last, she came upon the loch, and when her eyes found Malcolm, she gasped, her face turning even more red than before.

The contours of his broad back and firm buttocks glistened as he stood hip-deep in the water, singing to himself quietly. He scrubbed at his wide chest with his hands, then cupped them and caught some water within them, splashing it into his beard.

He looked magnificent, the curly hairs on his torso beaded with moisture, his muscles as sculpted as a statue of some ancient god.

Sorcha's jaw hung slack. She had never seen anything so gorgeous in her life, and the sight made her tingle in the deepest recesses of her core.

Malcolm turned in her direction, and she threw herself down on the ground, praying he would not see her. It seemed as though her prayers were answered, for he continued to bathe a while, then waded out of the water to retrieve his clothing.

She snuck one final peek at him, admiring his exposed manhood.

Then she scurried back to where the horses were tied, knowing that she would treasure the memory of what she had seen for the rest of her life.

“**T**here it stands,” Malcolm said, his voice strangely tight.

“The place of my birth.”

Sure enough, the turrets and banners of Castle Fraser loomed ahead of them, just past the next hill. They did not extend to the clouds as Sorcha had dreamed, but they were nonetheless impressive, with gilded buttresses and perched gargoyles.

“What a wondrous place,” she marveled.

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” he mused. “A great many changes have been made since last I saw it, adding tremendously to its...splendor. I wonder why that might be.”

“It is a good sign, though, is it not?” Sorcha ventured. “Clearly, your clan has prospered in your absence!” She caught herself and turned to him, embarrassed. “I did not mean to say that it has flourished because of your absence...”

“I quite took your meaning, thank you.” He grinned, but his eyes looked strained and uncertain.

“I know it must be difficult for you, returning here after so much time away,” she told him. “I appreciate what you are doing for me in making this introduction, and I am deeply grateful. I meant what I said before: Ask any boon of me, and I shall gladly grant it.”

As she said it, a breeze rippled through her dark red hair, making it look like a crown of wildfire. Her blue-green eyes flashed in the sunlight, and her radiance overcame Malcolm completely; if he had not been sitting astride his horse, the sight of her might have made him weak in the knees.

*Very well, he thought senselessly. The boon I ask of you, “my lady,” is simply this: Forget that I ever told you of my brother’s existence. Turn away from this place with me, and consent to be my bride, that we might*



*travel these lands together in joyous anonymity.*

*That we might both be free from the burdens of our pasts. Free to find happiness and contentment in our love, beholden to no one but each other and the whims of the wide blue sky.*

“No, my lady,” he reassured her with a weary smile. “Such a thing will not be necessary. Knowing that I have done you a service is enough to satisfy me.”

She frowned, tilting her head to one side. “If it is so crucial for your true identity to remain a secret while we are here, then it does not seem wise for you to leave your face exposed, does it?”

He nodded. “As a matter of fact, I had much the same idea, and an idea occurred to me.”

A short while later, they reached the outside of the castle. There was a moat surrounding it, just as there had been in Sorcha’s dream. However, there were no silver coins, and the dappled fish that swam within it appeared to be of normal size. The drawbridge was upright, its exterior carved with ornate depictions of snarling sea monsters and other fantastical creatures.

Sorcha wondered whether these were new additions, as Malcolm had said the other decorations were. However, she supposed that it was too late to ask him since they might be within earshot of the guards who now gazed down upon them from the upper walls.

“State your business!” one of them called down.

She took a deep breath and summoned all of her courage, wondering what waited for her beyond that drawbridge...and whether they would make it that far.

“I am Lady Sorcha, leader of the Campbell clan,” she announced, her chin jutting up at them defiantly. “I have come to speak with Laird Nathan Fraser about a matter of grave importance.”

“And what matter would that be?” the guard asked. “I am certain he will want to know.”

Sorcha folded her arms in front of her. “A matter for the ears of nobles, not sentries. Now I bid you announce my presence to the laird at once.”

The guard smirked, inclining his head toward Malcolm. “Who is your companion, then?”

She knew that he was testing her patience by ignoring her previous demand, but she chose to show her nonchalance by letting it pass. “He

is Malcolm Haldane, and he is a member of my castle guard.”

“You expect us to believe that a woman leads your clan and that she travels such a distance with only one man to guard her?” he scoffed.

“When Haldane the Butcher is the man guarding me, one is more than enough,” she replied smugly. “I have seen him cut down an army on his own.”

“Is that so?” The guard chuckled. “Why is his face hidden, and why does he not speak for himself?”

*Now we come to it*, she thought grimly, glancing at Malcolm. He wore a hood, and the lower half of his face was wrapped in cloth, leaving only his eyes visible. *I must speak surely enough to make them believe such an outlandish falsehood, or else our journey will have been for naught.*

“He has not spoken much since he was struck in the face by a morning star several years ago,” she answered. “Not with his mouth, at any rate...he speaks well enough with a sword. You would not wish to see what is behind the shroud which adorns his face, I assure you. If you did, I doubt you would sleep for a fortnight.”

The guard considered this for a moment, then nodded and gestured to one of the others.

A few moments passed, and then the air was filled with a grinding, clanking, cacophonous din as the drawbridge was lowered across the moat. Sorcha and Malcolm rode across, and once they were inside the courtyard of the castle, they found themselves flanked by a quartet of armored guards.

“We will escort you to the laird,” one of them said, his voice muffled behind the visor of his helmet. “If he grants his permission, you will be allowed a private audience with him. First, however, you must surrender your weapons to us.”

“You demand a great deal of trust from a lady in my position,” Sorcha challenged.

He grunted. “Then perhaps a lady in your position ought not risk her safety by gallivanting about so carelessly. Your weapons, now, or you will be expelled as quickly as you were admitted.”

Malcolm unbuckled his sheathed sword from his belt and handed it over, then did the same with his dagger. As he did, he exchanged a look with Sorcha, silently confirming that he intended to keep his

hidden blades.

She nodded almost imperceptibly, and he returned the gesture.

In truth, Sorcha had no real reason to believe that her life was in peril from this encounter. Malcolm had vouched for the honor of the man she was to meet, and more than that, it would make little sense for one clan to kidnap a member of another without provocation.

Just the same, the Campbells had suffered too much malfeasance for too many years. Sorcha was not naturally inclined to trust in the goodwill of others.

Or at least, she hadn't until she met Malcolm.

She did not know why she trusted him so implicitly after having known him for such a short span of time. She only knew that the impulse to believe in him was as strong as her need to take in air.

Was this how it had felt, she wondered, when Dand and Maisie had discovered their love for each other?

And if so, how dreadfully unfair was it that they were allowed to revel in their true love while Sorcha was forced to marry for reasons of desperation and convenience?

She tried to remind herself that theirs had not been an easy path either. Even so, she felt cheated—not because they were free to follow their hearts instead of the needs of the clan, but because by rights, *Dand* should have been leader in her place.

None of this should ever have been placed on her pale and narrow shoulders. She was a daughter of the clan, not a son. She had never been prepared for it.

*Prepared or not, you face it now*, she told herself sharply. *Now no more self-pity, girl! You haven't the luxury of it. You must meet the man who will decide your fate, look him in the eyes, and do what must be done.*

She and Malcolm dismounted, and the guards did likewise, leading them through a maze of corridors. Each one was lined with jewels, riches, tapestries, and treasures on display. There were suits of armor from faraway warriors, skeletons of beasts Sorcha did not recognize, and pieces fashioned from ivory and iridescent petrified wood engraved with gold and inlaid with precious gems.

She had never seen so many splendid items in one place before, and she was in awe of them.

Indeed, for the first time, she began to believe that she might find a laird who had collected such wonders interesting company indeed.

The guards opened the twin doors of a wood-paneled study with a vaulted ceiling, one decorated with a dizzying mosaic depicting the heavenly choir of angels descending from a starry sky.

And beneath it sat Laird Nathan Fraser.

He did not resemble Malcolm in the slightest, but Sorchha had to admit that he was handsome nonetheless. He had a tall and lanky frame and a thick head of wavy red hair. His eyes were light blue, his jaw was square and noble-looking, and he had a disarming smile as he took Sorchha's hand and kissed it. "What an unexpected pleasure, Lady...Sasha, is it?"

"Sorchha," she replied evenly, "and the pleasure is mine, good sir. Thank you for agreeing to entertain us unannounced."

"I must admit, my curiosity got the best of me," Nathan chuckled. "It is not every day that I get an unexpected visit from a woman who claims to lead her clan...and with a single disfigured escort who, from what my guards have told me, dispatches entire armies with a single blow?"

Malcolm raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"He is a valued companion," Sorchha said. "Would it be possible, then, for us to speak without the presence of your guards? The matter I wish to discuss is far too sensitive for their ears."

"Consider me doubly intrigued, then!" He gestured to the guards, and they withdrew, closing the door behind them.

"Now then," Nathan went on, rubbing his hands together briskly, "what business do you have with me?"

"Simply put," Sorchha informed him, "the affairs of my clan are gravely unstable of late. My people have spoken: They wish for me to wed so that my husband may lead. I have been told that your veins contain royal blood, no matter how obscure the connection?"

Nathan appeared mildly stunned by what had just been laid before him. "There have been rumors of a cousin on my mother's side, aye," he conceded. "The precise lineage has been difficult to pin down, so I would be lying if I told you that such a thing is a mortal certainty."

She sighed. "Nevertheless, it will have to do. You see, in order to break the curse which has settled upon my land, I have been charged with fulfilling the prophecy of marrying a warrior, a king...and a wolf-killer, which I am told you are."

The words stung Malcolm briefly. *I killed a wolf today*, he thought

sullenly. *A shame that I am no king, or even rumored to be the distant relation of one, else I would not be forced to make such a ghastly sacrifice as presenting Sorcha to be the bride of another.*

“A wolf-killer.” Nathan nodded, mystified. “I have not been called such a thing in many years now, ha. In truth, I had almost forgotten that strange moment from my boyhood. There were those who called me brave beyond my years...but to this day, I maintain that I was merely foolhardy for venturing so far from the rest of the hunting party and fortunate to have survived the experience. Still, it made a most amusing nickname for years to come.”

The words had an oddly polished air to them, as though they had been practiced many times before, along with the patina of false humility that accompanied them.

*Still, that does not make him a bad person, Sorcha reasoned. Merely practiced in the affable manner of a laird. If anything, this might indicate that he would make an ideal mate for my purposes. I have no such graces...no gift for the performance which makes leadership look as though it comes easily to some.*

“Let me see if I comprehend,” Nathan muttered pensively, pacing the room with a furrowed brow. “You come to my home with some mute master assassin at your side, you make bizarre claims about curses and prophecies and royal bloodlines, and you propose marriage and a union of our clans? I must tell you, Lady Sorcha Campbell, you sound like you are either a raving madwoman or someone who intends to play a harmful trick on me.”

Sorcha’s heart sank. “I assure you, sir, it is not my intention to—”

“So although your visit has presented an amusing diversion to an otherwise dreary day,” the laird went on implacably, “it seems to me that either way, the wisest course of action would be for me to call my guards back into the room and have them eject you at once.”

“You must not do that, Brother.”

The words echoed in the high ceilings of the chamber, almost as though the angels rendered above had uttered them.

All the muscles in Nathan’s face seemed to go slack at once as he stared at Malcolm.

“Remove your cowl and show your face at once.” The young laird’s voice was suddenly a husky phantom of its former strident self. The color had drained from his face, and in that moment, his eyes looked

as though they were gazing far past the man in front of him to the boy that man had once been, a lifetime ago.

Malcolm nodded, threw back his hood, and pulled the strips of cloth away from his nose and mouth.

"Marcus," Nathan breathed. "Dear Lord, it's really you. I never thought I would see you again."

"Neither did I," Malcolm replied gravely. "I had intended to stay away for the rest of my days, Nathan, as we had agreed. But I returned just the same. My presence here is intended to make you see how serious this woman's plea is...and how vital it is that you give it due consideration."

Nathan continued to stare at Malcolm for several long moments, astonished, as though he were in the presence of a ghost.

Then he began to laugh.

"*Marcus!*" he exclaimed, running to his brother and embracing him. "How I have missed you, my brother! Yes, of *course* I will give Lady Sorcha's words my full attention and ponder her offer most carefully indeed. But first, let us take a few moments to rejoice! All these years, Marcus! All these years of thinking about you, wondering where you had gone, trying to imagine what you would have said or done if you had been by my side! And here you are, alive and well. Praise God!"

Slowly, Malcolm began to chuckle, holding Nathan tightly. "Praise God indeed, Nathan. We are reunited at last. But of course, you know that my identity must remain a secret?"

"Yes, yes, of course!" Nathan affirmed. "You may adhere to this...'mysterious masked swordsman' pantomime so that none may recognize you. I shall have guest chambers arranged for both of you at once!"

"We would be most grateful," Sorcha said. "It has been a long journey and an eventful one."

"Then rest as you will, and when you wake tomorrow morning, I shall arrange for us to have breakfast in private. I wish to hear what my dear brother has been up to these past fifteen years. And I suspect your story and proposal, Lady Sorcha, merit far more discussion as well."

"Yes, I suppose it does, at that," Sorcha conceded, taken aback.

*Well, at least I have his interest and attention,* she thought wryly.

*Such things do not seem easy to secure from him.*

Once Sorcha was settled into her chambers, she quickly fell asleep, even though the sunlight still streamed in through the window. She had been utterly sapped of her strength from the travails of the day.

Her dreams were besieged by wolves, ones that stood on two legs, who threw stones and swung executioners' swords and demanded that she be punished for the curse she'd brought upon her clan. They challenged her to defend herself, and she wanted more than anything to speak on her own behalf, to explain that she had never meant for any of these awful things to befall the Campbells.

But she could not speak. Only a gasping, wheezing croak emanated from her mouth, and when her hands went to her throat, she found that she had flapping gills like those of the fish in the moat. She could not take in enough breath to proclaim her innocence. She was drowning on dry land.

The wolves advanced upon her, accusing her with their bloodshot yellow eyes. Their pack was sick. Their muzzles were caked with foam and dried gore. Their fur was matted and oozing with sores.

They were dying, and they blamed her. They followed her once, but now they were led by another, and they had turned on her.

Not just her, but all who shared her name.

As they lunged to tear out her throat, she saw the flash of Malcolm's daggers from the corner of her eye and was filled with sharp and sudden relief...

...and then she sat up in bed, gasping for air and checking to make sure there were no gills on the sides of her neck.

Thankfully, there were none.

At first, she was confused as to what day it was. After all, she had



drifted off in sunlight and awakened to it as well. But when she got out of bed and peered through the window, she noted the position of the sun and realized that she had slept through the night.

She dressed, wondering what the new day would bring. Would she be able to convince Nathan to marry her?

Did she truly want to?

*You must, she told herself sternly. Otherwise, you have pledged to marry that loathsome Ryan McKenna. As it stands now, you have no third option.*

Since she had awakened in an unfamiliar place, Sorchia had a sudden strong desire to see Malcolm. She believed she would be comforted by a familiar face and that her comfort would put her at ease, settling her nerves enough for her to make a compelling case to Nathan.

That, at least, was what she told herself as she made her way down the corridor to Malcolm's chamber and knocked on the door. "Malcolm, it is Sorchia," she whispered.

"Are you safe, my lady?" Malcolm's voice responded.

The question put her off her guard. "Why...yes, I am. Would you please open the door?"

There was a pause—such a long one, in fact, that Sorchia found herself possessed by an absurd impulse to knock again just to make sure that he had not left the room through the window.

Then the door opened, revealing Malcolm with rags wrapped around the bottom half of his face. "What do you wish of me, my lady?"

"I...suppose I wanted to, er, say good morning to you and ensure that you had a safe and restful night." She paused, then added sheepishly, "In truth, I had hoped to take solace in the face of a friend."

"Ah. Yes." His eyes were unreadable, but his tone sounded uncomfortable. "I would have thought you'd understand why it would be unwise for me to show my face while we are here."

She looked up and down the hallway, confused. "There's no harm in it, Malcolm. We are quite alone."

"Aye, and we were quite alone when we retrieved horses from the Campbell stables and rode to see Davina," he reminded her, "yet somehow, we were still spotted. We cannot afford to abandon caution,

my lady. Or at any rate, I cannot.”

She hated to admit it, but he had a point. They could not afford to be incautious while they stayed there, but it did not change her disappointment at having to content herself with seeing only his eyes above the wrappings on his face.

“I apologize,” she said tightly. “I suppose I was not thinking sensibly. Moments like these, perhaps, stand as proof that I am a feather-brained woman and not fit to lead a clan without a man by my side.”

Malcolm frowned. “I did not say that, my lady, nor was that what I meant. I merely meant to suggest that the stakes of this visit are high enough for both of us without taking unnecessary risks. Surely you would agree? If it is found out that you are in the presence of...an undesirable such as myself, Nathan will be unable to marry you. And my own fate will be most dire.”

“Very well, then.” She remained irritated with him but could not understand why. Why had it suddenly seemed so important to her to gaze upon his face first thing in the morning? Why did the mention of Nathan under the circumstances make her feel so uncomfortable?

She did not know, and she had no time to figure such things out. “We should go down to meet with him for breakfast,” she said.

Sure enough, Nathan welcomed them both warmly once they came down, ushering them into the dining hall and shutting the heavy oak doors behind them. Every inch of the table was occupied with dishes of gold and silver, all of them painted with colorful and fascinating images, and all of them piled high with food.

“I instructed the servants to bring all the food at once and leave us undisturbed,” Nathan explained, “so that ‘Malcolm’ here might remove his disguise and feast to his heart’s content.”

“That was most considerate of you,” Malcolm replied steadily, “but I believe it might be wiser for me to simply wait and eat in my own chambers once the two of you have concluded your repast.”

Nathan frowned. “Why on earth would you do that, Brother? Your secret will be perfectly safe in here!”

Malcolm shook his head. “Do you remember when we were children together in this place, Nathan? The hidden passages we explored, allowing us to eavesdrop on all of our father’s private conversations at will? I would venture to say that those same nooks

still exist and that the servants have just as much use of them as we once did. So no, I shall not risk it...and I would ask that you become more comfortable calling me 'Malcolm' and less so calling me 'Brother.'"

There was an odd look on Nathan's face, one that told Malcolm that yes, his brother *had* forgotten how they used to spy and play together as boys.

But the laird recovered quickly, giving him a big smile. "I shall tell you what I *do* remember, speaking of strange names for each other. And Lady Sorcha, I have no doubt that this will amuse you as well. When our father took us on a walk through the hills one day, we spied a few birds and pointed them out to him that he might identify them for us. Two of those names struck us as so silly that we began to use them ourselves as nicknames. Did we not, Corncrake?"

Malcolm searched Nathan's face carefully. The words were jovial and wistful enough, but there was a thorny edge to them as well, almost as though his brother were mocking him.

"Surely I can still call you that, at least?" Nathan prodded. "They were our secret names for each other, and besides, there is no one left here in the castle who served during the days of our youth. A strange reminder, I suppose, of how much time has passed. Now come, do you remember your name for me as well?"

Malcolm did, though he had not thought of it in many years. "Bonxie. Yes."

Sorcha giggled. "It is an odd thing indeed to imagine the two of you calling each other such ridiculous names!"

Nathan grinned at her. "Yes, it is, isn't it? We were a pair of little fools who believed that the whole world was our playground. And in a way, I suppose yours was, eh, Corncrake? You have had ample opportunity to travel and have adventures while I have been shackled to this castle by my responsibilities."

Malcolm was deeply unsettled that Nathan continued to speak to him in ways which might betray their previous relationship to any who overheard. But he had already made the request for Nathan to abstain from such talk, so what more could he say? Either Nathan was too simple and self-absorbed to recall the stated preferences of others for more than a few moments at a time (which would not have surprised Malcolm much, given what he remembered of their youth

together)...

...or he did remember, and he was making an unsubtle point about how little he cared for Malcolm's preferences. Which would also be in keeping with his prior behaviors as Malcolm recalled them.

Nathan had been a bit of a lout from time to time when they were boys. He had acted that way, not from any meanness of spirit, but simply from an occasional lack of good sense—at least, that was what Malcolm had always told himself when excusing his brother's actions.

*Even so, have I made a grave error in bringing Sorcha here? he wondered. In recommending Nathan as a potential groom, I had imagined him as I knew him last...a decent fellow, if a flawed one. Fifteen years is a long time, and it can change a man tremendously. What if those years did not mature him?*

*What if they only made him more set in his unpleasant ways?*

"I am sorry that your time here proved monotonous," Malcolm said through clenched teeth. "If it provides any consolation, the 'adventures' I endured were frequently unpleasant ones, and I doubt you would have wished to trade my place for your own quite comfortable one."

The smile fell from Nathan's face, replaced by a look of studied sympathy. "Yes. That was most insulting of me, was it not? You have my deepest apologies, Corncrake...not only for my lack of tact just now but for all of the hardships you suffered. I never forgot your sacrifice, and I have tried to carry out my duties in keeping with what I felt you would have wanted from me."

*Why does every word out of his mouth sound so rehearsed and insincere? Malcolm thought. As though he has used all this time to sharpen his tongue into a fork, that he might use his every breath to deceive. What have the pressures of leadership done to him? Perhaps I made the wrong decision all those years ago. Perhaps I should have remained, and he should have fled.*

But it was far too late for such concerns now.

Out loud, he said, "Thank you. That is most kind of you to say."

Nathan continued to relate amusing stories of their childhood to Sorcha while Malcolm's eyes constantly moved around the room, seeking out the hiding spots of their youth and inspecting them for servants who might be listening in.

Thankfully, he saw none...though it did little to ease his anxiety.

The midday sun warmed Sorcha's head and shoulders as she rode alongside Nathan through a beautiful golden meadow not far from the castle. After they had finished breakfast, Malcolm had returned to his chamber (with several plates of the food he had denied himself previously), and the young laird had proposed an afternoon ride so that he might learn more of her clan's situation.

"So this plague began with your brother Aodh, and you spent all of your time by his bedside with your healers," he said. "Meanwhile, the same sickness spread to the rest of the people in your lands. Do I have it right?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "A tainted well was suspected as the source —"

"Ah, but you believe there is more to it than that," Nathan interjected with a wink. "This 'curse' you spoke of, which comes from a woman leading the Campbells for the first time in four centuries."

She nodded. "I realize that such things might sound nonsensical to some."

"Aye, somewhat," he affirmed casually. "But then, there might be something to it, at that. For if you had been a laird instead of a lass, you would not have been governed by your emotions, and you would not have spent so much time sequestered with your little brother instead of involving yourself in the larger affairs of your clan. This is why this McKenna fellow and his followers now plot your downfall. Well, that and to seize power, naturally," he added with a chuckle.

*How can he speak so blithely about what has befallen my clan? Sorcha balked inwardly. How can he grin and be so effortlessly rude, as though he is capable of acknowledging no one's feelings but his own? Can I truly consider marrying a man consumed by such self-absorption?*

But once again, she reminded herself that her current choices were Laird Nathan or Ryan McKenna—and *that* was no choice at all.

She decided that his response must have simply been due to his lack of understanding in terms of how dire her straits were. She decided to clarify in the hope that his reaction would be more serious.

“It is not just my own position that I fear for, Laird Nathan,” she explained patiently. “I am concerned for the safety of my siblings. If Ryan is so fixated on seizing control of the clan, I have no doubt that he will imprison my sisters and brothers, or perhaps even worse.”

“And one of your siblings is married to Laird Fergus Brodie, is she not?” Nathan asked.

The sudden shift in topic put her off her guard. “Why, yes. My elder sister, Moire.”

“I confess, I know little of the Brodie clan. How are they situated? Are they quite wealthy? Influential? Do they have many horses and warriors at their disposal?”

Sorcha frowned, confused. “I suppose they are a rich and powerful clan in their own right, yes. But I hardly see what that has to do with —”

Nathan pulled on the reins of his steed, stopping in the middle of the wide field and gesturing for her to do likewise. She did, and they both dismounted.

*What has caught his fleeting interest now?* she thought bitterly. *Has he spied some fox or badger which commands his rapidly shifting attention?*

“Perhaps you were taken aback by the apparent change of subject, and if so, I cannot blame you. I have been told that my conversational manner can be somewhat...scattered, ha. That my mouth cannot keep up with my mind, and that others cannot keep up with either half the time.”

Then, to her surprise, Nathan bent to one knee on the grass before her and took her hand in his, looking up at her tenderly.

“I know that we only became acquainted yesterday, Lady Sorcha, and that my ways may seem strange to you. I hope, however, that you will come to understand me better in the fullness of time...as my bride.”

Sorcha’s eyes widened. “So, you *do* wish to marry me, then?”

Nathan gave her a winning smile. “Your story has moved me, dear

lady. You fear for the safety of your clan and kin, and who in your position would not? You are lovely, and you have a pleasant demeanor. Both the Campbells and the Frasers would benefit from such a union. In truth, we seem so perfectly suited for each other that I almost think we might have come to this conclusion on our own soon enough, curse or no! If you give your hand to me, I will use all the resources at my disposal to keep your siblings safe.

“So, then, do you accept?”

Oddly, Sorcha found herself hesitating, though she could not quite say why. Was this not what she had come here for? Had she not been handed the means to keep Ryan McKenna and his vultures at bay? With Laird Nathan, she could give birth to the next male heir to the Campbell lairdship.

*Presuming that Aodh does not recover from the plague, she reminded herself, else I will have wed a man I do not love for no good reason at all.*

But as a noblewoman, had that prospect not always been lurking in her future? Would it not have eventually been her duty to find a man of noble blood whose clan would lend strength to their own?

And Nathan was fair of face and largely pleasant of disposition, and he *did* have a manner that at times could be amusing.

This was her best chance presenting itself. She knew that she must take it.

“Yes,” she answered quietly. “I accept your generous proposal.”

“Excellent!” he beamed. “We shall return to the castle at once and dine with Mar—sorry, Malcolm,” he corrected himself. “Tomorrow, we will announce our engagement, and the day after that, I shall return to your lands with you, and we will be married there.”

“And the plague?” Sorcha asked.

Nathan shrugged. “The plague is a result of the curse, and we are breaking that curse with our nuptials, are we not? Besides, we will bring additional healers with us in case fulfilling the old woman’s superstition does not prove to be enough. Either way, I believe it is safe to assume that your clan will rejoice when you return with me on your arm.”

*Well, perhaps not the entire clan,* she thought ruefully, picturing the putrid expression on McKenna’s porcine face when he learned of her betrothal.

She accompanied Nathan back to Castle Fraser, where he ordered

the servants to prepare a supper in private just as they had for breakfast that morning. Then he bade Sorcha excuse him while he dressed for the meal.

Sorcha went up to the chamber where Malcolm had been staying and knocked on his door again. "It is Sorcha," she said softly. "Please, may I enter?"

"It would not be wise," Malcolm's voice answered, "for a lady such as yourself to be seen entering or leaving the bedchamber of a man in her service."

She frowned. "Surely you are being overcautious! May I please speak with you, just for a brief moment? I will do nothing to jeopardize your position while we are in this place, I swear to you!"

There was a pause, and she heard a heavy sigh. Then the door opened, and Malcolm ushered her in, the bottom half of his face exposed. "You *do* jeopardize my position by making a demand such as this," he murmured darkly as he closed the door behind her, "but nobles and lairds are clearly accustomed to getting their own way in every particular, so I suppose I must obey."

His words stung and bewildered her. "You seem upset with me, sir. Have I wronged you in some way?"

Malcolm appeared to consider this for a moment, then shook his head. "No. You have done nothing wrong. I apologize for my uneven temperament. Being back here after so long has affected my mood more profoundly than I imagined it would. How was your ride with Nathan?"

"It went quite well," she said. "In fact, he...has agreed to marry me."

A shadow passed over Malcolm's face, but he forced a smile nonetheless. "Then our mission has been an unmitigated success. You have my most sincere congratulations."

"I owe everything to you," she reminded him. "My clan might be spared a dreadful fate, thanks to this welcome introduction you have made. Laird Nathan is having another private supper arranged for the three of us shortly. I do hope you might consider eating with us this time?"

"I suppose I may as well," he replied wearily. "He speaks so freely of our past that any who eavesdrop will easily guess my true identity. If I am to be hanged, at least my belly will be full."



Sorcha opened her mouth to ask him why he might be hanged if the people here learned who he truly was. She wanted to know what crime this good man she had come to know could possibly have committed that might warrant such a harsh punishment.

But deep down, she was fairly certain that she knew. And she was uncertain of whether she could bear to have it confirmed.

Before she had a chance to say anything, however, there was a knock at the door, which startled them both. "Just a moment!" Malcolm called out, wrapping his face once more. He motioned for Sorcha to remain out of sight, and she did her best to squeeze into a corner of the room.

He opened the door and found a plump, swarthy servant girl with thick black hair (and a wispy mustache to match) waiting for him. "Laird Nathan wishes the pleasure of your company at supper," she informed him. "And that of Lady Sorcha as well."

"I will tell her, then, if I see her," Malcolm answered evenly. "Is she not in her chamber, then?"

The girl gave him a knowing look and clucked her tongue, as though she had been made party to some delightful mischief. Then she took her leave.

"I suppose we had best go down to supper at once, then," Malcolm said, a bitter edge to his voice. "After you, my lady."

But she did not move. Instead, her eyes searched his. "Malcolm, surely it must have occurred to you that Davina's prophecy might refer to you?"

His eyebrows shot up. "Me? Preposterous."

"Is it?" She moved toward him, putting a hand on his arm. "Is it really? You are a warrior, and you have killed a wolf. Likewise, you are Nathan's brother, which means—"

"You are mistaken, my lady." His voice was as hard and cold as the stone of a crypt. "That prophecy had naught to do with me."

She nodded, deciding to let the matter rest. Still, she knew she could not have gone through with her engagement to Nathan if she had not at least presented the alternative to Malcolm.

As they proceeded down the wide stone stairs, Malcolm walked a few steps behind her, trying to keep up the appearance of being nothing more than her loyal servant.

*Except it is not merely an "appearance," is it?* he thought. *You are her*

*servant, nothing more. You petitioned to enter her service when you first came to town, and you undertook this errand with her as a service to her.*

*Why, then, do you find yourself speaking so harshly to her when she has done no wrong?*

*It is because once this matter is concluded, I will have to leave her service. I will have no alternative available to me...not if she is to be wed to my brother. And I cannot bear the thought of never setting eyes on her again for the rest of my days.*

When they reached the dining hall, the table was once more loaded up with marvelous food and flagons of wine and ale. The dishes were inlaid with pearls and rubies, and Malcolm noticed that the tapestries hanging around them had been changed for different ones.

“Did Lady Sorcha share the good news with you, Corncrake?” Nathan asked eagerly.

Malcolm put on what he hoped was a convincing smile. “Indeed she did. I am delighted to hear it, and I wish you nothing but the best.”

“And it is all thanks to you!” The young laird shook Malcolm’s hand vigorously, then hugged him. “If you had not ventured back here in the face of personal peril, I would not have found my bride and my happiness!”

Malcolm took his seat at the table. He ignored the food in front of him, choosing to regard his brother shrewdly instead. He could not help but notice that in his exclamations of gratitude, there was one phrase Nathan had taken great care to avoid—one that any laird in his position would have uttered without hesitation: *I am in your debt*.

No, Nathan would not dare to say that. If he did, he would risk Malcolm asking for a pardon in return, and Nathan had no desire to be confronted with that request, did he? He would much rather have the living proof of that horrid night as far away from him and his lairdship as possible.

Even if that proof was his own brother, whom he’d once loved above all others.

The thought of it broke Malcolm’s heart, though he felt more anger than sadness; not anger at his sibling, but at himself for expecting to find anything different upon returning home. For daring to hope that somehow he might be allowed to stay and reclaim the name he’d been

born with.

“So, Brother,” Nathan said briskly, “how have you passed the day, eh? Been revisiting old haunts, seeing how the clan has fared in your absence?”

Suddenly, Malcolm felt his temper slip away from him. He was already disgraced from this place without hope of redemption, and he had forced himself to watch the woman he desired so fiercely be betrothed to the man responsible for his exile in the first place. He would be leaving under a dark cloud one way or the other.

Sorcha deserved to know who she was marrying. He decided that if he could not give her his heart, he could at least give her the gift of truth.

As the old saying went, *Tell the truth and shame the devil.*

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Malcolm answered in a neutral tone. “And as I did, I saw many farms which had once been prosperous fallen to ruin. I saw families starving and begging for alms in the streets...far more than I recall from our youth. I also cannot help but note all the fine things that decorate this castle, these walls, this table. Even your guards wear gilded armor and carry swords of silver. Tell me that these things are unrelated, Brother, I beg you. Tell me that our people’s suffering resulted from poor seasons of planting or unfortunate weather and that all of these riches surrounding us simply fell from the sky. Tell me that your greed and excess has not reduced our once-proud clan to such squalor and misery.”

Sorcha was surprised to hear these things and turned to frown at Nathan. “Laird Nathan, is this true? Have the fortunes of your clan declined so sharply in recent years, and if so, what was the cause?”

The smile remained frozen on Nathan’s face, but his eyes grew dark and flinty. He barked a humorless laugh. “Did you know, Lady Sorcha, that Corncrake here is not of my blood? Not long after I was born, he was discovered in a basket near the gates of the castle by one of the servants. From his lack of manners, one can almost believe it.”

She looked at Malcolm, and when his eyes met hers, she understood his vehemence in denying his connection to the prophecy and the deep sadness in his eyes when he’d done so.

That shared look was not lost on Nathan, whose smile widened.

“That fat girl I sent to fetch you returned here once she had done so,” the young laird went on. “From the blush in her cheeks and her

ham-handed attempts at innuendo, she seemed to be under the impression that Sorcha was in your chamber, doing her best to remain hidden from view.”

Malcolm’s face turned pale. “Nothing untoward happened between us, I swear it.”

“Oh, there’s no need to convince me!” Nathan laughed. “I’m quite sure it didn’t! And not only because you are a man of such surpassing honor and self-sacrifice. No, it is because you have never believed yourself worthy of what would make you happy, Marcus. Do you remember when we were boys, and you would see something at the market which you wanted? You knew that all you had to do was tell our father you desired it, and it would be yours. But instead, you always bought it so that you might present it to someone *else* as a gift. And that is what you have done once again in bringing this woman to me, haven’t you, Brother?”

Malcolm could hear no more. He stood, and in that moment, he was wholly uncertain of whether he meant to head for the door or throttle Nathan where he sat. They were in opposite directions, yet both were equally tempting.

He made his choice and took his leave without a backward glance.

Malcolm ran through several rooms of the castle—empty ones, thankfully—before remembering that his face was exposed. He wrapped his nose and mouth quickly, looking around to make sure he hadn't been seen.

But how could he be certain? Every chamber of the place seemed to contain a secret entrance and at least two places where one might hide to watch or listen.

As a boy, he had been intrigued and enchanted by the castle's mysteries.

Now he felt stymied by them.

He lifted his cowl and went to the stables, taking comfort in the presence of the horses. In his travels, he had come to have the utmost respect for the creatures—more, in fact, than he was often able to muster for his fellow men.

This led him to remember Thistledown, the horse that had carried him off into the night all those years ago. He had treasured that animal's company for many years after, thanking it almost daily for its service in hastening his escape. When it took ill and died several years later, Malcolm had wept bitterly for two days after.

He missed that horse now. He wished for the comfort he used to take in stroking its muzzle and talking to it after long days of riding and wandering.

It had made him feel less alone in those days. It had made him feel like he had a family again.

"That was what you meant, then," Sorcha's voice spoke up behind him.

Malcolm turned and saw her standing in the doorway of the stable. "About the prophecy? Yes. What he said was true...I was found in a

basket by one of the castle servants. Our father called me Nathan's 'brother,' but in truth, he took me in so that I would be a playmate for his son and heir."

"And then you became more to me than that when the moment came," Nathan commented, stepping in to join them. "You became my salvation, and I have never once allowed that truth to leave my mind."

"What you said to him at the table was ghastly," Sorcha snapped. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

"I should be, and indeed, I am," the young laird admitted. "My spite toward him since his arrival has come from nothing but shame, and for that, I am heartily sorry. He is correct, you see. Our clan did once prosper, under the leadership of our father."

"Your father," Malcolm corrected him sharply. "What happened after he passed, Nathan?"

Nathan sighed wearily, sitting down on a bale of hay. He rubbed his temples. "Our uncle Oban happened, Brother. He came to guide me until I came of age to lead the clan, and from him, I received bad advice. He said that perception of prosperity outweighed prosperity itself and told me that if I did not fill the castle with the trappings of wealth, our rivals would take advantage of our instability in the wake of our father's death. By the time I understood that he had bankrupted the people of our lands, he had fled with a carriage-load of stolen gold, never to be heard from again."

"Then why did you not sell all these foolish trinkets to feed our clansmen?" Malcolm pleaded.

"Because then we truly *would* look weak and ripe for conquest," his brother snapped. "We still have enemies, such as the Hamilton clan, who would lunge for our throats if we started auctioning off our belongings like a pack of starving peddlers! No, this was the only way for us to recover...a marriage between myself and a noblewoman of means!"

"Then you freely admit that you are using her for your own ends!" Malcolm growled.

"Just as I am using him for mine," Sorcha spoke up quietly. "Or had you forgotten why we came here, Malcolm? I intended to use my betrothal to him to solve my clan's problems and defy Ryan McKenna. In fairness, the fact that he is doing likewise need not dissuade me."

Malcolm nodded. "Then you mean to continue with this marriage."

“I do, aye. I must.”

The words were like an arrow in Malcolm’s heart, but he did his best to keep his composure. “So be it. We have accomplished what we set out to do, and now I must take my leave of you, my lady.”

“What? Now?” Sorcha sounded devastated. “This minute? I thought—”

“You thought what?” he challenged. “That I would remain? How? Things would seem to be far simpler for Nathan—and for you as well—as long as I keep roaming roads far from here. Simpler for me too, I expect. I have grown quite accustomed to such a life, you see. After fifteen years, I daresay it even suits me.”

Sorcha’s eyes were filled with sorrow, and her mouth opened, but she closed it again, not knowing what to say, how to keep him from leaving when it was so clear that he must.

Malcolm secured the saddle to his horse and mounted it. “Well, Brother, here we are again...me riding off while you remain.”

“I scarcely survived such a scene the last time,” Nathan said sadly. “I do not know if I can endure it again.”

“You shall have to, it seems.” Malcolm gave Sorcha one last, longing look. “Goodbye, my lady.”

Before she could return his farewell, he rode his horse out of the stable as fast as he could, unable to bear gazing upon her for another agonizing moment. Better to fix his eyes on the road ahead of him and do his very best to forget the one behind.

The horse under him was not Thistledown, but he supposed it would have to do.

Once he was gone, Nathan turned to Sorcha with a smile that was almost apologetic. “I fully realize that this is neither the most romantic nor auspicious of beginnings to a betrothal, Lady Sorcha,” he said. “However, I think you know as well as I do that the union we now plan will help us both immeasurably. And beyond that...well, I do rather like you, you know. That is, um, I could quite see us getting on well once we get to know each other better.”

“Perhaps.” But her eyes were still hopelessly fixed to the spot where Malcolm and his horse had been just moments before, as though she believed she might be able to make them both reappear through sheer force of will.

“Well!” Nathan went on. “Now that all that’s been settled.

Tomorrow, we shall announce our betrothal here and allow the Fraser clan to celebrate. Then the day after, we will travel to your lands, at which point, I am sure there shall be a celebration there as well! Two celebrations! Sounds like a bit of fun, does it not?"

"I doubt whether your clan will be able to afford much of a 'celebration,'" she pointed out.

He shrugged. "Aye, fair enough. But they will soon, with the help of the Campbells...and for that, dear lady, I am supremely thankful."

There was a celebration the next day, and though it was meager, it was sincere indeed. The members of the Fraser clan flocked to Sorcha to meet and welcome her. She could see in their eyes that they understood fully what this union would mean to them, and they were so pitifully grateful that it almost broke her heart. Their children of the village presented her with crude dolls and toys made from grass and stalks.

*At least some good will come of all this, one way or another,* she thought.

While all of this was going on, a messenger swiftly crossed the fields and hillsides on horseback, making his stealthy way to the lands of the Campbells. When he arrived, he sought out the estate of Ryan McKenna and, finding it, implored the sentries to grant him an audience.

When asked what business he had there, he smugly informed them that it was a matter of the gravest urgency...one involving the impending marriage of Lady Sorcha.

Within moments, he was ushered into the private study of Ryan McKenna and greeted by the man himself.

"You have information you wish to share, then?" McKenna asked.

The messenger—a lad with hair like straw, a wart on his large nose, and a chin that was nearly nonexistent—grinned craftily. "Not 'share,' sir, so much as 'sell.'"

"And how do you come by it, that I might put stock in its value?"

"I work in the stables of the Fraser clan, sir," the lad insisted. "I often sleep beneath the straw, like. And while I was lying there last night, I heard a great many things from the laird and his guests... things about you, and about them getting married, and something to do with the laird's brother gone these many years, and—"

"Yes, yes, you have convinced me, right enough." McKenna



reached into one of his desk drawers and removed a large pouch of coins, setting it between them. "I believe you had best start at the beginning, young man, and leave nothing out."

Within the hour, the stable boy was riding back to the Fraser lands with the pouch jingling at his side, and Ryan McKenna was smiling as he came up with a plan to outmaneuver that dratted Campbell girl once and for all.

The morning after the Fraser clan celebration, numerous servants about the castle, including the chinless stable boy, reported to their posts quite late indeed and blamed it on the revels of the previous night. Sorcha made it clear that all of them were to be forgiven for this rather than disciplined. (This gesture made many of them love her all the more.)

The laird's carriage was brought to the front gates, pulled by four magnificent white horses. The vehicle was covered in gold leaf and featured extremely flattering commissioned portraits of Nathan himself on both sides.

"I take it this triumph of excess was proposed by your uncle as well?" Sorcha guessed as she stepped into it.

Nathan grinned sheepishly. "You are correct. Still, it is quite comfortable, is it not?"

"Oh yes. We shall travel luxuriously indeed, for the handful of hours before we are set upon by highwaymen attracted by our garish means of transport."

Nathan chuckled. "You have a very droll wit, my lady, do you know that? One more reason I strongly suspect that we shall enjoy each other's company tremendously once we are married."

*I should hope so, she thought sourly, since I am certainly not enjoying his company now. At least he is pleasant to look at and seems like he will surely be easier to associate with as a spouse than Ryan McKenna would be.*

She wondered how many times she would be forced to repeat this to herself during the journey back to Castle Campbell.

"And to allay your fears," he went on as the carriage trundled over the drawbridge, "we are being escorted by a pair of my castle guards,

so we should be perfectly safe.”

*A pair of underfed palace guards clad in armor more gaudy than functional, against a band of brigands? Sorcha thought distastefully. Am I to be wed to a simpleton?*

She feared she knew the answer well enough.

The first few hours of the journey were spent in awkward silence as they both stared out the windows of the carriage, making a great show of admiring the scenery so they might not feel compelled to interact.

But it was a long trip indeed, and eventually, Nathan broke the stillness.

“So, I suppose we should take this time to get to know each other better, eh?” Nathan suggested amiably.

“Should we?” she replied. “I would think we have a great many years ahead of us to do that.”

He laughed loudly. “Ah, there’s that splendid sense of humor again! Delightful! Now then, let’s see, what shall I ask you first? Oh, I know! What is your favorite color?”

“I have never given it much thought,” Sorcha admitted. “I spent much of my girlhood trapped in a rather gray and terrible place following the murder of my parents, so I never had much time to ponder the merits of color.”

“Yes, yes, but you are free to do so now!” he insisted. “So go on! What color do you find the most fetching?”

*What a peculiar man,* she thought, not for the first time. *He has just been informed that I was orphaned by an act of violence and that I spent the years which followed kept in a dreary place against my will, yet he remains fixated on his initial question, almost as though he had not heard me.*

“If I were forced to choose,” she replied slowly, “I would say blue.”

“Ah, yes, like the flowers you wear in your hair!” he observed cheerfully. “They highlight the color of your eyes most splendidly, by the way. Although the ones you wear now are somewhat withered. You might want to replace them.”

“Thank you,” she retorted in a brittle voice. “How kind of you to point that out.”

An awkward pause followed, and he asked, “Do you wish to know my favorite color?”

“If you wish to tell me, yes,” she said mildly.

“The color of your hair!” he answered immediately, as though he had been sitting upon his response for far too long. “I find it most remarkable!”

“You are far too kind.”

Sorcha was uncertain of what else she might say under the circumstances. She had noticed, however, that he seemed to enjoy being asked questions, so she asked the first one that came to her mind. “What is your worst memory of life?”

For a moment, his defenses seemed to tumble, and she caught a glimpse of the man he truly was behind his glib exterior—deeply frightened, uncertain, and vulnerable.

“Why would you ask me such a thing?” he breathed.

“Because I, too, wish to be acquainted with the person I am about to marry,” she replied flatly, “and I doubt whether I will learn much about you from your favorite color.”

He laughed mirthlessly. “Aye, you speak the truth there. Very well. My worst memory of life is the night I watched Marcus ride away. So we have that in common, I suppose.”

She was disarmed by his words and by the sadness and sincerity of his tone. For the briefest of moments, she wondered whether there might be far more to him than she had seen thus far.

Suddenly, she heard approaching hoofbeats, followed by the voice of one of the guards who rode with their carriage: “Halt! Who goes there?”

Nathan’s eyes widened, and she knew at once that her words from earlier haunted him now; he was petrified by the thought that they were about to be waylaid by bandits, robbed, kidnapped, ransomed, or worse.

Then she heard the response to the guard’s query, and her heart felt strangely pulled in two directions as she wondered whether she was better off or worse.

“We mean you no harm. We are here with a message for Laird Nathan Fraser, from Ryan McKenna of the Campbell clan.”

Nathan looked over at her and shrugged. “Where is the harm in accepting such a message?”

“Where is the harm?” Sorcha could not believe her ears. “This man plots the downfall of my family, and you would hear a message from

him? You must not!" She leaned forward and gripped Nathan's hand urgently.

He looked down at her hands, his eyes filled with a hard sadness. "Aye, now that you want something from me, you rejoice in my touch, is that it?"

Sorcha did not know how to respond. He was not wrong, but she dreaded what was to come next.

Nathan leaned out the window of the carriage. "Laird Nathan Fraser will hear this message."

She heard the sound of a rider dismounting, his boots striding across the grass. His riding cloak filled the window on the young laird's side, and he leaned down, revealing the tricorne hat and smirking visage of Currie.

"Good afternoon, Lady Sorcha," he sneered. "A pleasure to see you again, truly."

"Never mind that," Nathan cut in. "You say McKenna has a dispatch for me?"

"Indeed he does," Currie hissed. "Or rather, a proposition. McKenna's private wealth far exceeds that of the Campbell family. He knows of your debtors and the substantial sums you owe each of them. He wishes to inform you that he has already sent emissaries to all of them, along with bags of gold to buy your debts from them. The riches you have squandered belong to him now, and he is willing to forgive them all, down to the last coin...all that, aye, plus five thousand pounds sterling for you to waste as you see fit." He gestured to a fat sack of coins hanging from the saddle of his horse by way of emphasis. "All he asks in return is that you forsake your betrothal to Lady Sorcha and return to your own lands at once."

"Preposterous!" Sorcha exclaimed. "You may return to your foul master and tell him that Laird Nathan rejects his outrageous proposal!"

She turned to glance at Nathan, and her heart became a leaden weight in her chest.

He was considering it, God help her.

"You cannot be tempted by such a proposition!" she blurted, horrified.

"Oh no?" He raised an eyebrow at her. "Would your family clear my debts in a stroke, then? Would they hand over five thousand

pounds, just like that?"

"Not in a stroke, perhaps, no," she stammered. "Not just like that. We do not have such riches on hand. But in the longer term, our alliance would benefit you tenfold!"

"I have no interest in the longer term," Nathan informed her. "I have labored beneath my debts long enough, and I wish to be rid of them immediately." He cleared his throat and addressed Currie. "I hereby accept Ryan McKenna's proposal and take custody of the, er, monies he has chosen to bestow upon me."

"You fiend!" Sorcha shrieked, enraged. "You traitor! You monster! How could you? How could you?"

Nathan smiled at her sadly. "For the greater good of my clan, Lady Sorcha, of course. You of all people would understand that, I'd think."

"But all those things you said about us getting on as we got to know each other!" she flailed desperately. "Were those nothing but falsehoods?"

"You are a most handsome woman," he answered, "and you do have a formidable wit. I have no doubt that it would soon have been wielded as a weapon against me since you so evidently find me a fool and a boor. But now, not only will the poverty of my clan be ended, I will be able to someday marry for love rather than money! And you... well, I suppose you can marry Marcus now if you wish, or marry a scarecrow, or die a lonely hag for all I care! Now kindly remove yourself from my carriage!"

Sorcha was shocked, and she gave a moment's honest consideration to stubbornly remaining where she was. But she did not fancy the notion of being dragged from the vehicle by the rough (and perhaps lecherous) hands of the guards who would be ordered to remove her.

So she gave Nathan one last cold glare, opened the door, and stepped out of her own volition.

The carriage door slammed shut behind her so suddenly that it provoked a yelp from her. Currie walked back to his horse, removed the bag of coins from the saddle, and presented it to Nathan. Sorcha could now see that he had brought two guards on horseback with him; clearly, he hadn't expected that he'd need to take her by force, and he had been correct.

"You have made a wise decision this day, Laird Nathan," Currie

snickered, “and you have made an ally as well. My master will not forget this.”

“How kind of him,” Nathan answered with a grin. “Do send my regards.”

Then the carriage driver lashed the horses with the reins, and they started, galloping back in the direction from whence they came so swiftly, in fact, that within moments, all the evidence that was left of their existence was a cloud of dust.

“And now, my lady,” Currie said mockingly, “I would suggest that you allow us to escort you back to the Campbell lands. It can be so dangerous, you see, for a woman to travel such a distance alone. Any number of...grotesque fates might befall her, were she to insist upon it.”

“You are nothing if not subtle, Currie,” she remarked dryly. “Let us not mince words: You have taken me as your prisoner, and I am to be at the mercy of Ryan McKenna.”

“Aye, so you are!” he concurred gleefully. “Just as your older brother and his wife are, and their cherub of a child!”

Panic gripped Sorcha, wrapping itself around her midsection and squeezing as remorselessly as a corset. “What on earth do you mean, you villain?”

Currie bared his rotten teeth in a grin. “I mean that the *thief* Dand, his *servant* wife Maisie, and their wriggling worm of an infant—who, if allowed to live, will doubtless become a pox-ridden harlot—have all been confined in the dungeons. If you cooperate, lass, there is a chance that their lives might be spared. If you do not...well, then the gutters which carry the muck and filth of the prisoners will carry blood as well. Do you understand me, you worthless wench?”

The horror of his words clawed at her insides, and she nodded, numb with fright.

*I will do whatever it takes, she thought, panicked. I will agree to anything, if only it will preserve my family. I spent too many years away from Dand, and I cannot risk his life—or his wife’s or their daughter’s—no matter what the cost. Perhaps Nathan was right, and I am being governed by my emotions in ways that a man in my position might not. So be it. I am who I am, and I will not be the woman who condemned her older brother to torment and death.*

*And besides, she added, there is one advantage: They have not*

*mentioned Aodh or Freya, which means neither of them are in danger.  
At least, not yet.*



Sorcha traveled with Currie and his men for several hours. Her

hands were tied behind her back to prevent any attempt at escape, and there was a rope around her waist as well, the other end of which was tied to Currie's saddle.

She had mentioned several times that she needed to relieve herself, hoping that they would free her hands to do so, or give her some other opportunity to liberate herself, but she had drastically underestimated Currie's cunning, it seemed, as he snickered and told her to release her bladder into her underclothes for all he cared.

So she tromped along through weeds and mud and stony patches of the ground until her feet hurt and her skin was slick with perspiration. Her breath was coming in shallow gasps, and she did not know how much longer she could be pulled along in such a fashion.

"Please!" she panted desperately. "Might we not rest, just for a moment or two, so that I may catch my breath? The way back to Castle Campbell is long indeed, and we have much still to travel!"

"Is it a long way?" Currie mused sardonically. "Funny...on horseback, it seems like very little distance at all! We shall stop to rest when *I* say we shall, girl."

"But I cannot remain on my feet much longer!" she protested.

"Suit yourself!" he replied with a shrug. "Topple over when you feel you must, and you shall be dragged the rest of the way." He shook his head slowly. "That's the thing about you Campbell scum, isn't it? You're not tougher than the rest of us, you're not older or more experienced, you're not braver or more worthy. 'Tis your bloodline you hide behind, aye...that and your accursed 'cleverness.' For that is how you see yourselves, is it not? A pack of wily boys and girls who believe they can outwit their elders indefinitely and thus always get

their own way? Well, how is that working out for you now, eh?"

He laughed cruelly, and his cohorts joined him.

So Sorch a continued to limp and stagger along, wondering if she might, in fact, collapse soon. Her nose itched, and she felt fairly certain that if the devil were to suddenly appear before her and offer to scratch it in exchange for her immortal soul, she would give the proposal serious consideration.

Currie's words had hit her like thrown daggers as she thought about what life had been like for her and her siblings. Sometimes it seemed as though the entire world of adults had suddenly and viciously turned on them for no reason, as though they had been surrounded by countless dogs who were friendly and obedient one moment, then rabid and bloodthirsty the next.

Their loving parents had been murdered by their fiend of an uncle. Sorch a, Aodh, and Freya had been separated from Moire and Dand and sent to be imprisoned for years by a clan of filthy brutes and pigs. They'd been reunited, only to have that brief shred of happiness snatched away from them by the blackmail and extortion of the Grant clan, forcing their rightful laird to give up his title and practically exile himself.

And now this latest ignominy at the hands of Nathan Fraser and Ryan McKenna.

It felt like more than she could possibly bear.

*How much misery and misfortune must one family endure? she wondered. If we somehow prevail through this latest agony, will lasting happiness be our reward, or only more tragedy and heartache?*

Yes, Currie's words may have been like thrown daggers; however, they were still outdone by the *actual* dagger that was suddenly thrown from the side of the road.

The blade arced through the air with keen precision, slicing through the rope that tethered Sorch a to Currie's saddle. Currie and his men scarcely had time to react before another thrown knife buried itself in the shoulder of one of the guards. He yowled with pain, pulling it out and tossing it to the ground.

"What the devil is going on here?" Currie demanded.

Another knife came, this one planting itself in the thigh of the other guard, eliciting an additional cry of anguish. "We're being attacked!" the guard wailed.

“Then fight back, you imbecile!”

“Against who, sir?” The first guard gestured at the wooded area around them. “We cannot see who they are, or how many they are, or *where* they are! We may as well be fighting ghosts!”

At that, a sinister laugh emanated from the trees above, causing the guards (and Currie) to visibly shudder. “Very well,” Currie announced. “Then grab the rope at once, and we shall take the girl and leave!”

“You will leave,” Malcolm’s voice called out from the spot where he was hiding. “But she will remain if you value your lives.”

“There!” Currie pointed in the direction the voice had come from. “Follow the sound of his voice, you fools, and dispatch him!”

The guards nocked their crossbows, aimed, and fired at the source of the sound.

But when they went to investigate, there was no body or blood; indeed, no indication that anyone had been there at all.

Another knife twirled end over end from the underbrush on the other side of them, lodging itself in Currie’s left hand. He screamed, staring with bulging and bloodshot eyes at the weapon that now protruded from his palm.

“Show yourself, coward!” one of the guards yelled. “I’d wager you’ll run out of blades afore we run out of arrows!”

“You have no idea how many daggers I have upon my person,” Malcolm answered from cover. “Come to think of it, I’ve quite lost count myself. And surely you cannot be silly enough to believe I have missed your vital areas on purpose. No, I shall not run out of blades any time soon, but you have run out of warnings. Leave your captive and return to the rock you collectively crawled out from beneath, and you may continue to draw breath—without whistling through a hole in your throat, that is.”

Currie and the guards exchanged worried glances, then bolted. “McKenna shall hear of this!” Currie bellowed over his shoulder.

A few moments passed, and then Malcolm leaped down from the branches nimbly, just inches away from Sorcha.

She laughed gaily. “How on earth did you do that? You were amazing! You were like some sort of phantom!”

“Aye, I can be quite stealthy and surpassingly lethal when such skills are called upon,” he replied with a smile. “A fact you might have

come to know well had I remained in service as your guard for much longer.”

“But why did you return for me?” she asked. “I thought you had gone off to pursue whichever adventure the open roads presented to you?”

He gestured to the arrows that had been fired at him. “Was that not adventure enough, then? Should the tips of the shafts have been aflame as well, to add to the excitement?”

Sorcha put a hand on his arm, looking deep into his eyes. “No more jests, Malc—Marcus.”

He shook his head. “No, please, do continue to call me Malcolm. I’ve come to quite enjoy the sound of it, especially when spoken by you.”

She did not respond, merely continuing to gaze upon him, waiting for his answer.

Malcolm sighed, unable to keep quiet any longer. “I...did not ride long, my lady, before changing direction to intercept you on your way to Castle Campbell. I do not know why. Perhaps I felt that I had left words unspoken with my brother. Perhaps I simply felt the need to look upon your beauty one last time.”

His words touched her, and she found herself moving closer to him. “Or perhaps you sought to talk me out of marrying him?”

He had no answer for that. As he said, he was wholly uncertain of his motives himself. And indeed, it was possible that her words hit closer to home than he might have liked to admit.

“If I had,” he asked haltingly, “would I have succeeded?”

Sorcha had continued to draw nearer to him by the moment, though she was uncertain of whether it was deliberate on her part or if she was simply being compelled by powerful forces far beyond the control of either of them.

She only knew that their lips were inches apart...and then they were pressed together, hungrily, passionately, urgently, so hard that it almost hurt.

On the deepest and most primal level, Sorcha understood that what she was feeling was more than the warmth of their breath mingling, more than their bodies touching. It was their souls connecting like two entire worlds colliding in a brilliant burst of devastating beauty, destroying each individually so that the heat and

energy of their meeting could create something more blindly beautiful than either could have conceived alone. Something that would blaze in the sky for millennia to come, like a sun or a comet.

Something that would endure forever.

Sorcha wanted more than anything to simply surrender herself to that wonderful moment, to allow it to take them wherever it would.

But Malcolm's hands clamped firmly on her upper arms, pushing her away from him.

"We cannot do this, my lady." The sadness in his voice was as grinding, ponderous, and fatalistic as the movement of the segments of the earth against each other in some dreadful yet inevitable quake.

"There is no one here to see us," she breathed.

He shook his head. "No. But that does not matter now. You may not marry Nathan, and you may not marry Ryan McKenna. But you will marry someone, right enough, and when you do, that man will be of noble blood. I am not."

"I care not for such things, I promise you!" she balked. "Your lineage matters not to me!"

"No, I believe it does not, and I am touched by that—more than you can possibly know. But it does matter to your family and to your people. As I understand it, your family has already survived the disgrace of one of your siblings due to a marriage to a commoner. I would not have it sustain another such blow, even if you would. I would not do you such a dishonor."

"It is no dishonor to me!" she insisted.

"Think, Sorcha, I beg you! If you leave your title behind to enjoy the fruits of 'true love' as your older brother did, who shall be left to lead your clan if Aodh and Freya do not survive this plague? There would be no Campbells left! Your line would die out, and Ryan McKenna and his ghouls would see your clan dismantled and rebuilt in their own images! You must preserve your family, no matter the cost!"

She sighed. "I shall let this matter rest, if only for the moment so that we may concentrate on more immediate matters. Now that you have freed me from my captors, what comes next?"

"I have a plan," he told her. "However, for it to work, we shall have to part ways for a time."

Her eyes widened in horror. "No! I shall not feel safe without you!"

“And you shall certainly not *be* safe while *with* me,” he said with a wry grin. “In fact, I daresay that while I attend to a bit of strategic business on your behalf, the safest place for you will be within the walls of Castle Campbell itself.”

Sorcha could not believe he would say such a strange and senseless thing.

Not until he explained his plan.

Ryan McKenna slammed his gloved fist against the table of his

study. “Damn you, there were three of you worthless buggers and only one of him, and he *still* took her from you?!”

“My men could not see him to shoot him, sir!” Currie protested. “The way he moved around us...he was like some sort of bloody spirit of the wood, confounding and bewildering us as he did!”

“You are all too easily easily ‘confounded and bewildered,’ Currie, as are the drunkards you employ as your guards.” McKenna threw himself into his chair with a frustrated grunt. “This ‘Malcolm’ who accompanies her is no more than a raggle-taggle wanderer who sells his swordsmans’ skills to pay his tavern bill. He is no tactical genius, no valiant warrior or master assassin so far as we know. Why, then, does he stymie us so? What goes on between them that he would take such pains to rescue her from you?”

“They are having improper relations, no doubt!” Currie chortled.

“Aye, ‘tis likely enough,” Ryan conceded with a nod. “And when it comes to the people of this clan and what they choose to believe, a bit of lurid gossip is every bit as a proven truth, eh? Even so, I do not care for the fact that the girl is out of my sight and free to do as she pleases out there beyond our walls.”

“What harm can she possibly do us now, though, eh? Is she likely to raise an army of wild animals against us, like some forest princess in a fairy tale?”

McKenna glared at him. “Your florid flights of imagination do not amuse me, Currie. No, if there were any justice to the world, the wench would be rotting in the dungeons beneath us this very day.”

Suddenly, the door flew open, and one of McKenna’s sentries burst in, out of breath.

“Damn you armored clods of the ramparts!” McKenna snarled. “Do you not know how to knock? I should think a guard, of all people, might understand the concept of not intruding on one’s privacy unannounced!”

“My apologies, sir!” the hapless sentry panted. “However, she said you would wish to know at once. That is, we already *knew* you would wish to know at once, of course we did, anyone would, but she *also* said it, you see, and so—”

“What in God’s name are you blathering about?” Ryan demanded.

“Lady Sorcha! She walked right up to the front gates of your estate, sir, bold as brass! Says she demands to speak to you at once!”

Ryan’s eyes lit up as he leaped out of the chair. “Aha! So there is justice in the world, after all, Currie! You are witness to it!”

Currie blinked, stunned, looking like a man who had just received a sharp blow to the head. “But why would she do that? Just show up, like, when she had already been freed by that ghostly bastard?”

“Oh, no doubt ‘tis all part of some cunning scheme on their part!” McKenna said jovially, heading for the door. “They seek to outthink me, to put me off my guard!”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, sir,” the guard said, scratching his head, “but why would such a thing put you off me? I’m quite a likable fellow, I am! Ask anyone!”

“Do be quiet, you fool!” Ryan snapped. “No one was speaking of you! Now then, let us see how Lady Sorcha plans to bedevil us, eh? This should be most amusing!”

He strode out to the gates of his estate with Currie struggling to keep up. Sure enough, Sorcha stood just outside the walls of his abode, her pale and pointed chin lifted in casual defiance. She was surrounded by five sentries, all with their swords drawn and pointed at her from every direction.

*Her composure is to be commended*, Ryan thought wryly. *God help me, part of me almost hopes I do end up marrying her.*

“So, then!” McKenna laughed as he approached her. “I dearly wish that I might believe you were led here by a sudden and burning desire to become my wife, but somehow, I suspect that you have other inclinations!”

“Indeed, Ryan McKenna, I have no intention of marrying you,” she snapped.



“Have you forgotten our pact, little one? You agreed that if you did not marry Laird Nathan, you would marry me!”

“If I *chose* not to marry Laird Nathan,” she corrected him primly, “or if he chose not to marry me. *That* was our accord, sir. And he and I did indeed pledge ourselves to each other, your shameless intervention notwithstanding.”

McKenna shrugged. “I have no memory of such specific language to our agreement. But no matter. One way or the other, this clan shall be mine. The people are on my side. You stand alone.” He smirked. “Not for long, though. Indeed, I imagine you will not lack for company in the dungeons beneath your own damned castle.”

The sentries closed in upon her, taking her by the arms and leading her toward Castle Campbell.

“Do let the guards know, won’t you, when you change your mind and choose to be my bride?” McKenna called out mockingly. “I suspect it won’t take more than a day or two for you to decide you’d rather have that lovely body nibbled by me instead of the rats!”

Sorcha felt a shudder travel the entire length of her body at the thought of either option, but she still remained docile as the sentries escorted her to the castle.

It had been easy enough for her to believe in Malcolm’s plan when they had been standing in a sun-dappled clearing, just inches apart, taking comfort in each other’s presence.

Now she offered up silent prayers that it would all work out.

Otherwise, she dared not imagine what sorts of horrors might be in her future.

To her dismay, as she was led past farms and shops and taverns, she could hear the rumbles of disapproval all around her. These people—her clansmen, families who had pledged their fealty to hers for many generations—did not believe in her. They did not trust her.

They were grieving for loved ones who were infected or dead, and they blamed her.

But she did not blame herself.

*I tried, damn it,* she thought fiercely as she was marched through the streets of the village. *I did all the prophecy bade me to do, yet I was still foiled. So be it. Now I shall reclaim my clan upon my own terms... mine and Malcolm’s.*

*And once that is done? Once McKenna has been driven off like the*

*squealing pig he is? Then I shall find a way to be with Malcolm, I am certain of it. He is my destiny. I have felt it, and I will achieve it, so help me.*

It was a good thought to cling to as she was shoved through the gates of the castle that had been her home. The servants all stared as she passed...some with sympathy, others with scorn.

She mentally cataloged which ones fell into each category and hoped that she would find the strength within herself to forgive the ones who had thought the worst of her once this nightmare had all been settled.

Even so, those faces included so many she had thought better of. So many she had believed loyal to her.

The steps down to the dungeon were rough and slimy, causing the sentries to slip and stumble in the dark, and Sorcha along with them. There was a split second when she even considered taking advantage of their momentary loss of balance to turn and flee. The stink of the stone cells was enough to drive her mad with panic, even after a handful of moments.

But no. She had told Malcolm she would have faith in him and see this through. And so she would.

She was led to the farthest corner of the dungeons, no doubt so that there was even less chance of escape for her than there would be for the rest of the prisoners (and the chance for them was already less than naught).

Then she heard the sound of a baby crying and knew that they had chosen this section of the dungeons for another reason as well.

“Sorcha?” It was Dand’s voice coming from the gloom ahead of her. “Dear God, Sister, tell me they did not get you too!”

“They did.”

She saw Dand then, and her heart felt like it would collapse in upon itself with woe.

He was dreadfully thin, his face smeared with grime, his eyes haunted and afraid from days of staring into nothing but pitch darkness. Maisie was next to him, and Sorcha hugged her, feeling her sister-in-law’s ribs through her dress.

The baby continued to shriek horribly, and Sorcha could scarcely blame her. It was the sound her own soul was making as well, at the prospect of being confined to this ghastly and godforsaken hole

indefinitely.

“What dreadful business has transpired here, Sister?” Dand demanded.

“I shall tell you all,” she promised. “But first, is there any news of Aodh or Freya?”

“None yet,” Maisie said. “With any luck, even if they are healed from their ailments, they will keep their distance from this place lest they suffer our fate.”

Sorcha turned to Dand, and in the retreating light of the torches, she saw tears shining in his eyes. “Brother, have no fear,” she reassured him. “We will be free soon enough.”

“I was merely looking at the blue flowers in your hair,” he replied, choking back a sob. “You always wore them, ever since we were children.”

“Yes, because their familiar scent has always given me comfort,” Sorcha told him, beginning to cry as well. “Here, perhaps you might take comfort from them as well.”

She carefully plucked a few of the dried buds from her hair, giving them to her brother, her sister-in-law, and even her infant niece.

**M**alcolm's first errand went quite well indeed, though it took

him far out of his way in achieving the second, causing him to push his poor horse nearly to its breaking point in trying to reach Castle Fraser in a timely fashion.

As it was, the sun had long since set when his horse came within its sights, and he left the animal behind, carefully closing the rest of the distance on foot and unseen.

He knew he would be turned away at the gate, even with his face covered as it had been before. Nathan would have no desire to grant him an audience. He might even be unmasked, his identity revealed, and his long-deferred punishment served to him at last.

Which meant he would simply have to arrange a private meeting with Nathan on his own terms.

Malcolm knew that the changing of the guard would be the easiest time to slip past the sentries, and he knew precisely where to pass through a narrow burrow-hole in the outer wall, just as he and his brother had so many times as boys. Likewise, it was easy for him to cross the courtyard under the cover of darkness.

Moving through the castle undetected was far trickier.

There were secret passages and bolt-holes aplenty, but Malcolm had to be careful in ensuring that no servants were in any of the rooms before he appeared through a hidden portal in a wall or hearth. He had to stand with his ear to the inner walls numerous times, listening for footsteps and voices, praying his hearing was acute enough for him to escape detection.

Mercifully, it was, and he found himself in the hidden chamber behind his brother's wall within the hour. He was about to press his ear to the soot-covered surface once more before he heard Nathan's

voice: "Oh, do come in, Corncraike, for heaven's sake! Do you not remember that I know the secrets of this place even better than you do?"

Malcolm pressed his thumb against the stone, which triggered the wall's counterweight, allowing it to swivel and present him to Nathan.

"Well, then." The young laird produced a pair of wine glasses and a bottle, poured each of them a drink, and handed one to Malcolm. "As you are well aware, you are surrounded by over a hundred servants and guards—all of whom would lunge for your throat were I to sound the alarm. I can only imagine that you have urgent business with me indeed, eh? Regarding Lady Sorcha, no doubt? I'd have thought that you might have overcome her captors and spirited her away to some sort of happy ending by now."

"She is imprisoned by her own clan," Malcolm responded flatly. "As are members of her family. Her position is untenable because you betrayed her."

"I merely received a better offer," Nathan countered, draining his wine in a single gulp.

"Then honor means so little to you? What, then, of the sacrifice I made for you all those years ago? I forfeited my life among civilized company. I lived among barbarians and beasts for a lifetime to cover your crime!"

"Yes, yes, and I am grateful," his brother mumbled, pouring himself another drink.

"Then *show* me your gratitude!" Malcolm insisted. "Help Sorcha to regain control of her clan, Nathan, I beg of you! Prove to me that you are the same good person I once knew before that terrible night!"

"I had been drinking, damn it." Nathan bared his teeth, drinking his second glass of wine and immediately pouring a third. His hand was trembling slightly. "I was a mere boy, I had never had a drop to drink before, and my good sense was bewitched by a heathen holiday! It was not my fault!"

"I know that full well!" Malcolm hissed. "But it was not my fault either, and still, I paid for it dearly! Nathan, all I ask now is for you to honor your arrangement with Sorcha—no more, no less. You swore you would join your clan with hers and that you would defend her and her siblings against this McKenna blackguard."

The laird rubbed his temples, wincing. "To drag my clan into a

potential war? You ask too much of me, Corncrake.”

Malcolm took Nathan’s wrists in his hands and lowered them, staring into his eyes intently. “Aye, Bonxie. And you did not have to ask me to take the blame for the poor boy you ran down with your horse. I simply did it for you because I loved you, as one brother loves another. Please, do this for me now.”

Nathan laughed humorlessly. “Even presuming that I consented to such a thing—and mind you, I never will, as no sane person would—what course of action would you propose to see it through, hmm?”

Malcolm paused for the briefest of moments. This man had betrayed Sorchá once. Was it not likely that he would do so again? Malcolm did not wish to believe such a thing, but he understood that it was because he still saw Nathan as the boy who was once his brother, not the man he had become.

“Before I tell you,” he said slowly, “tell me this, please, Nathan: Why did you abandon your promise to Sorchá?”

His brother hung his head with a sigh. “For the same reason I was so unpleasant to you during your visit, I suppose. Being confronted by people like you and Sorchá made me realize that I had been unworthy of the sacrifice you made all those years ago. I have not been a good laird to our clan. I know that. I see it every day when I look out upon the people who starve and suffer because they were foolish enough to trust in my leadership. Do you not think I have pondered daily what might have happened if I had taken the blame and left instead of you?”

“I was not of your bloodline,” Malcolm pointed out. “I would not have ruled in your stead.”

“Oh, of course you would have!” Nathan waved him away impatiently. “Foundling or no, you were the only other one who might have ruled after our father’s death, as we had no other siblings. Tell me truly, Malcolm, I beg of you, for I have obsessed over it so these many days and nights: Would you have done a better job? Would you have resisted our uncle’s poor advice rather than allowing him to lead you astray?”

Malcolm searched within himself and found no answer there. “In truth, Bonxie, I do not know. It seems we will never know. All there is left to know is right here, now, between us. Will you do what is right, Brother? Now, when it matters most?”

Nathan thought it over for a few moments. "I will. But before I agree to do so, I require something from you in return."

"Oh? And what is that, pray tell?"

He gave his brother a wry smile. "Something only you can give me: Peace of mind, at last."

**T**he hoofbeats were heard in the outlying farms at first.

Dand and Maisie would surely have heard it if they had been in their home rather than the dungeons; indeed, perhaps it would have awakened their infant daughter. As it was, numerous babies in the farmhouses wailed from the sound, adding to the anxiousness of their parents, who peered out their windows to see what riders were approaching.

And when they saw, many of them slammed their doors and shuttered their windows, knowing that violence and death would almost surely follow the men on horseback. A mere handful—bolder men than their fellows, perhaps, or simply more eager for a reward—ran ahead as fast as their legs and horses could carry them, bellowing warnings as loudly as they could.

Then the legion galloped through the village, which remained oddly still and silent, as most of its occupants were either dying of the plague or caring for those who were. And even if they had taken a few moments to observe the encroaching horde, what then? Would they have taken up arms against these intruders upon their lands?

Unlikely. Not after all they had suffered and lost. Not when, at that point, it mattered little to any of them who ruled since, after all, they would only rule over a necropolis soon at the rate the clansmen were dying.

At last, the riders came to a stop before the gates of Ryan McKenna's estate.

There, they found almost a hundred soldiers standing in formation with their swords and bows, waiting for them as McKenna paced the high walls of his home.

"What is the meaning of all this, then?" McKenna inquired. He



almost sounded amused. "If Clan Fraser has come to overwhelm and conquer the Campbells, I would have thought you might march upon the castle."

"It is my understanding that the power within the Campbell clan resides here these days," Laird Nathan shot back. "Convenient, as your walls and gates do not offer nearly the resistance that those of the castle might."

"I also might have assumed you would bring more men to accomplish such a task," McKenna added, indicating the fifty or so warriors on horseback who carried the banners of the Fraser clan.

"In truth, Brother," Malcolm muttered under his breath, "I might have assumed the same thing."

"To challenge a clan which has not directly provoked or threatened my own?" Nathan whispered back. "I was fortunate to find this many to support me."

"Perhaps if you had been a better laird..." Malcolm retorted dryly.

Nathan gave him a venomous glare but did not reply.

"My men would appear to outnumber yours two to one," Ryan commented.

"Your men are nothing but a pack of poorly-trained, undisciplined servants with swords," Nathan replied. "They are no match for even twenty true warriors, let alone fifty."

"And you, then?" McKenna addressed Malcolm, who was mounted at Nathan's side. "The guard who was so recently employed by Sorcha? Who liberated her from the clutches of my friend Currie? Am I to assume, then, that you were always a spy for the Fraser army, meant to destabilize us from within and make us ripe for the taking?"

"Certainly not," Malcolm countered. "I was charged with the protection of the Campbells from enemies without and within. You have betrayed the clan, sir, and imprisoned its rightful heir. You are a fiend and a usurper, and the time has come for you to pay dearly for your crimes against those you swore fealty to. I intend to see Lady Sorcha freed at once and returned to her former position of authority."

"Aye, I've no doubt that you shall see all manner of pretty fantasies once you reach the afterlife," McKenna chortled. "Soldiers! Cut them down where they stand! A hundred gold pieces to the man who brings me the head of this upstart guard!"

McKenna's men charged forward, roaring and brandishing their

weapons. The Fraser fighters stood their ground, and the opposing forces crashed against each other savagely with the ring of metal against metal.

Malcolm rode hard, swinging his sword left and right to put down as many of McKenna's men as he could. But their pikes were formidable weapons, able to reach up to him and, alas, to stab the horse out from beneath him. The noble creature succumbed to their attacks almost immediately and fell on its side. Malcolm had to leap away at the last moment, lest his leg be crushed by the weight of his mount.

*That creature did not deserve such a gruesome fate*, Malcolm thought furiously, thinking of his beloved Thistledown gone these many years. He hacked and slashed at the McKenna sentries with all his might, and sure enough, although they were equipped with serviceable weaponry, their ability to fight paled before his own.

Likewise, their armor was pretty to look at but not especially functional. And why would it be? Surely, he reasoned, this McKenna fellow had largely hired and outfitted them for show. Their assigned task had been to look imposing enough to frighten off potential intruders and to toss unwelcome visitors out on their ear when Ryan commanded it.

They were indolent peasants seeking a high-paying position, nothing more. They certainly were not warriors.

*But if they continue to stand against us, I shall see to it that they die as such this day*, Malcolm vowed silently, burying his blade in the belly of one of them and chopping half the head off another.

As he fought, he could not help but notice that Nathan was holding his own quite well. He may have been a dreadful ruler, but he seemed to be a passable fighter.

Meanwhile, Ryan McKenna rushed down to a hidden passageway beneath his estate. There, he was disappointed to find Currie quite alone and looking utterly stricken.

"Where is everyone else, you fool?" McKenna demanded. "I told you to go to the village for reinforcements so that we may put a decisive end to this fray!"

"I tried, sir!" Currie moaned pitifully. "I rode through town, sounding the call for all good men to come to the aid of their new master! Only no one answered the call!"

“What the devil do you mean?!”

“I mean, sir, that the people of this clan have been so besieged by disease and turmoil that they no longer seem to care overmuch who leads them. And whoever does, they have no desire to risk their lives on such a person’s behalf! It seems our lads are on their own, sir!” he wailed.

“Then we shall have to hope our numbers will suffice,” McKenna rumbled.

As it turned out, he need not have worried.

His sentries may have been poorly trained and poorly outfitted, but their masses were still formidable enough to hold back the Fraser soldiers.

*No, ‘tis more than that, Malcolm thought grimly, plunging one of his daggers into an oncoming McKenna guard. Nathan’s men are hearty enough, but they are not giving their all to this fight, for they feel they have no stake in it. These men do not threaten Fraser lands or clansmen.*

*And thanks to the general lack of motivation on our side, and the expression of regret on Nathan’s face, I imagine they are about to retreat from this battle.*

*Will I go with them? To stay here without their support will mean death for me. And to return to Castle Fraser with my brother, having made my pact with him...*

But before Malcolm could finish that thought, he heard a horn blow a short distance away.

It was a signal for an army to charge. And he knew damn well which army it was.

“Go forth, men!” Laird Fergus Brodie cried out, pointing his sword at McKenna’s estate. “Show no mercy until you hear their plea of surrender!”

The warriors of the Brodie clan—over a hundred of them—surged forth, howling like demons from the darkest pits of hell itself.

The Fraser soldiers stood aside with expressions of gratitude on their faces, allowing the Brodies to ride upon Ryan’s men with astonishing speed and ferocity. The guards were driven back within moments, and many of them dropped their swords and raised their arms, yielding to the clearly superior force.

The fight ended almost as quickly as it had begun. McKenna saw that he was well and truly beaten and called his remaining forces

back, signaling his surrender.

“It is a great pleasure to see you, Laird Fergus!” Malcolm greeted him.

Fergus tilted his head, frowning. “You are the one Aodh and Freya spoke of, then? The man who brought them to the place where they were cured of their ailments? The one who returned there to warn them of what was transpiring?”

“So that they might enlist your aid, aye, and ensure that Sorcha is restored to her former position.”

“*Lady Sorcha*,” Fergus corrected him suspiciously. “I would ask you to show respect for my sister-in-law’s title, sir.”

Malcolm laughed incredulously, gesturing to the Brodie men around him. “Have I not done so by arranging all of this?”

“You make a fair point, I suppose.” Still, there was a hard glint in Fergus’s eye, as though he was wondering about the nature of Malcolm’s relationship with Sorcha.

*Well, time enough to be troubled by that later*, Malcolm supposed.

“And you are Laird Nathan Fraser, I take it?” Fergus went on, riding up to Nathan. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. I regret that it had to occur under such violent circumstances. Now then, shall we ride to the castle so that we might liberate Lady Sorcha from her burdensome chains?”

Sorcha, Dand, and Maisie had heard the approach of Nathan's

horde and that of the Brodies shortly after; however, with no view from the dungeons, they were unable to determine who was riding or what their purpose was. All they could do was wait and try to quiet the wailing of Maisie's infant.

The rest of the prisoners barely seemed to notice the commotion. After all, what difference did it make to them? In recent years, the leadership of the clan had changed hands from Ronald to Aodh to Dand, then back to Aodh again, then to Sorcha, and, most recently, to Ryan McKenna. Yet through it all, very few of them had been released or even remembered. No matter who ruled the Campbells, these scrawny, filthy, dishonored men and women were all certain they would die without ever seeing the sun again.

Within the hour, heated words were exchanged at the door to the dungeons, and then they were unlocked; Laird Fergus strode in. "Lady Sorcha? Where are you, lass?"

"Here!" Sorcha called out. "And Dand and his family are here with me!"

Naturally, there were a few jokers among the other prisoners who also called out, claiming to be Sorcha (most of them men).

But Fergus found his way and embraced Sorcha, Dand, and Maisie by turns. "Thank God you are all alive," he said. "And apparently, not affected by this plague which has raged through your lands."

"It is a curious miracle, is it not?" Dand agreed. "Most of the prisoners here have fallen before the sickness, yet we have remained unaffected. So, has McKenna relented, then?"

"He has, aye," Fergus told him. "Aodh and Freya are with Moire at my fortress across the water. I will send for them shortly, now that the

battle is won, and Aodh will reclaim his lairdship. Control of the clan will belong to the rightful Campbell heirs once more, thank heavens.”

“Then their visit to those healers was successful?” Sorcha asked hopefully. “Their illness has been cured?”

Fergus nodded. “Indeed it has. They could not tell me how, only that they were tended to with the utmost care, and that the fever and fatigue no longer had hold of them.”

Sorcha’s heart took flight with sheer relief. Her prayers had been answered. All of her siblings remained alive and safe. She would see them in due time and, God willing, for many years to come.

*If only I could send all of the afflicted clansmen to receive the same treatment,* she thought. *Ah well. One problem at a time, I suppose.*

“Where is Malcolm?” she asked.

Her brother-in-law raised an eyebrow. “He is out in the courtyard with his brother. Why do you wish to know?”

“I wished to be certain he had survived the conflict,” Sorcha said. “And I wish to thank him for the part he has played in all of this. Without him, there would have been no way to secure your assistance and win the day.”

Fergus nodded. “Very well. Come, let us get you out of this foul place.”

Sorcha and the others ascended the stone steps, shielding their eyes against the glare of the sunlight. When her vision cleared, she saw Malcolm standing next to Nathan and ran to him, embracing him tightly.

“You have my eternal gratitude!” she said, burying her face in his chest. “You shall remain here, Malcolm, and you shall be granted the highest honors as a mighty warrior in service to this clan! A home, a title, servants of your own...anything you wish, sir, you have only to name it, and it will be yours!”

*Especially if what you say you wish is to be with me,* she added mentally, inhaling his comforting musk. *Because by God, I do not care about your station or my own. If you would only agree to be with me, I would find a way to make it happen, I swear it. After what you have done for me this day, I would give my life for you. Parting with the trappings of my nobility would be nothing to me.*

*And now that Aodh is recovered, might I not do as Dand did and choose my own love...my own destiny? Who could blame me for such a*

*thing?*

In truth, Sorchá had suffered a horrid reminder of what it was to be a prisoner. Now that she had regained her freedom, she did not wish to waste another moment of it on a life that lacked his presence and his love.

But as he looked upon her, his eyes were filled with sadness.

“What is the matter?” she asked, touching his face. She could feel the eyes of Fergus and the others upon her and knew that such behavior was considered inappropriate, but she did not care about such things anymore.

“Your offer is most kind, my lady, as it ever was.” His voice was hoarse, his tone oddly stiff. “However, unfortunately, I cannot remain here. The aid of my brother was contingent upon a price, you see: That I would return with him to the home I once ran from and face my trial and punishment, which has been deferred for so very long.”

“What?” She could not believe her ears. “Whatever you did back then, Malcolm, surely it cannot have been as bad as that! Can time not have forgiven your sin? Whatever is on your conscience—”

“The death of a boy is on his conscience, trampled by a rider who’d had too much wine,” Nathan spoke up, his tone neutral. “And that crime has been on my conscience as well all these years, for having allowed the offender to escape his comeuppance all these years. Now, at last, the matter shall be put to rest for good and all. Come, Marcus. Let us go away.”

As Malcolm went with Nathan, Sorchá reached out, her voice cracking with desperation. “Malcolm!”

His eyes met hers, and the melancholy in them nearly destroyed her. “I suppose you may call me by my true name now, my lady, if you like,” he said. “It is the name that the mob will be shouting angrily, no doubt, as they call for my head.”

And with that, he mounted his horse and rode off with Nathan and their remaining warriors, not even permitting himself a glance back.

That night, there was no celebration at the castle.

They had achieved victory well enough, and under normal circumstances, a visit from so many of the Brodie clansmen would have been met with revels so that old allies could drink together and exchange stories. Not only that, but the news of Aodh and Freya’s recovery might have merited some music and dancing.

Instead, Dand, Fergus, Edmund, and Sorcha sat at the long table in the dining hall, each of them barely touching the food in front of them.

“So there was affection, then, between you and this Malcolm fellow?” Fergus finally spoke up.

“Nothing untoward occurred, I assure you.” But as she said this, she blushed slightly, thinking of the kiss they had shared.

“And surely you cannot condemn her for that,” Dand said. “I am a noble who fell in love with one who wasn’t, and I chose to follow my heart in that matter. Such things *do* happen, after all. There is no shame in them.”

“Your situation was quite different,” Fergus pointed out. “You lived most of your life as a wanderer and a brigand. Of course you were not inclined to follow tradition in such matters.”

Edmund raised his eyebrows. “And what of your love for Dand’s sister, then? Tell me, old friend, when you revived her on that beach, and her eyes met yours, were you utterly indifferent to her charms until you later learned she was of noble blood? I seem to recall this was not the case at all.”

Fergus chuckled humorlessly. “Fair point. Even so, none of it is of any consequence now, is it? From the sound of it, Malcolm—or Marcus, or whomever he truly is—will either be jailed for life or put to death.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Sorcha said quietly.

The others turned to look at her.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Edmund asked. “The matter is settled, you have been freed, and Malcolm has gone on to fulfill his obligation to his brother. You *have* no say in it, my lady, I’m sorry to say.”

“When I was in dire straits, my future bleak and uncertain, all my hope lost...when I prayed to God for deliverance... That man was my salvation.” Sorcha’s words were as firm as iron. “I will not abandon him in his hour of need. I mean to do all I can to save him, and I will let no one stand in my way.”

“Then will you, perhaps, allow people to *aid* you by confiding your plan to them?” Edmund asked with a small smile.

“First, I must go to the Fraser lands,” she said. “Without causing any fuss about it, if possible; no drums or banners, no grand



processions. If I am to accomplish anything, I must approach this with the utmost discretion so as not to tip my hand.”

“And then?” Dand leaned forward in his seat, intrigued.

“Inquiries must be made with regard to the crime in question, and perhaps even beyond that to the mystery of Malcolm’s birth. He was found in a basket. But from where? Who left him?”

Fergus shrugged. “Some peasant girl who could not afford to feed her unwanted infant, no doubt. Such things occur frequently.”

Sorcha nodded. “Perhaps. But I must grasp at any possibility to prove Malcolm’s innocence, no matter how slight.”

“And if he is not innocent, my lady?” Edmund asked.

“I have looked into that man’s eyes and seen what is behind them,” she retorted. “He is a killer of men, yes, and of wolves, but not of boys. Not even by accident. There is some darker plot at work here, and I intend to expose it.”

Dand stood with a grin. “Then it seems we must be off at once, my dear sister, does it not?”

Sorcha smiled, then turned to Fergus. “And you, brother-in-law? Will you aid me?”

Fergus shook his head. “I admire your courage and will, to be sure, and I hope they serve you well in this endeavor. But my duty is to my clan, your sister Moire, and our child. I cannot embark on such a quest. However...”

“No, please, do not say it, I beg you,” Edmund muttered softly, rolling his eyes.

“...it would be my pleasure to send Edmund in my stead,” Fergus finished.

Sorcha’s eyes lit up. “Excellent! I can think of no one I would rather have at my side in such an urgent matter. Edmund, you may begin by going to the stable and having our horses saddled!”

“Imagine my honor at being appointed to such a vital task,” Edmund grumbled.

“S<sub>o</sub>, then.” The old woman brought a cracked teapot and

several mismatched cups to the table for Sorchas, Edmund, and Dand. “Ye have come tae ask about what transpired on Samhain all those years ago, aye? Wi’ the two Fraser lads an’ that other boy?”

“Yes, madam,” Sorchas replied.

“Och, there’s nay need tae call me nowt but Daisy!” the woman cackled amiably, pouring tea for each of them. “‘Twas me name while I was in service tae Laird Jamie, an’ it allus suited me right enough. I never put on no airs, did I? Knew me place well, I did.”

“As we said,” Dand said, “anything you might be able to tell us about what happened that night would be most appreciated. Some of the other people we spoke with—the ones who worked in the castle during those days—indicated that you might know more than they do regarding the subject of Malcolm’s...that is, *Marcus’s* professed guilt.”

“On that topic, I know nay more nor less than the rest of ‘em do,” she rasped. “Oh, do not mistake me, sirs and lady, I know plenty, as do they. It’s only that the rest of ‘em ain’t nearly so willing tae speak the truth of the matter as I am.”

“And why is that?” Edmund asked.

Daisy’s face twitched briefly, and then she smiled again, a bit sadly. “Because they’re nae dying, lad, an’ I am. An’ when a woman like meself anticipates meetin’ her maker sooner rather than later, she values truth above savin’ her own skin.”

Sorchas leaned forward, putting a hand on the woman’s frail arm. “Will you tell us, then?”

She nodded. “Aye. ‘Tweren’t much of a secret, now were it? Nathan was allus a lad wi’ a mean streak of mischief in ‘im. Too clever for his own good, like. An’ he liked tae steal wine from the kitchens.

Had a taste fer it, he did, developed at far too young an age. Still, what were we tae do about it? His father Jamie didnae want tae know about the doings of his own boys, an' that's the truth. Allus occupied wi' other matters...like drinkin' up all the wine in the land with that ghastly brother of 'is, and beddin' the servant girls when he thought 'is wife wasn't looking..." Her voice trailed off, and her eyes clouded briefly, as though she were being assailed by a memory she would just as soon have forgotten.

"Go on," Edmund prompted.

"Nathan went ridin' that Samhain, after drainin' an entire bottle on 'is own. Drunk, he was, when he went to the stables to get 'is horse an' ride by the moonlight. Marcus went wi' him, tryin' tae talk 'im out of it. Only Nathan wouldn't listen, an' then he trampled the stable boy, didn't he? There were a few servants who saw it from a distance. Mind you, they couldn't exactly intervene, now, could they? No, they could only watch as Marcus—honorable little fool that he was—agreed tae ride off so he could take the blame."

"And so he was out there all those years," Dand mused, "and no doubt causing Nathan many sleepless nights as he wondered whether his brother might someday return to speak the truth."

Daisy pointed a gnarled finger at him. "That's it exactly, lad! All who knew the truth played along all those years after. How could we do otherwise? Nathan was the son of a laird. Our word would have been nothing compared to his."

"No," Sorch a replied softly. "I suppose not."

"Then it is settled!" Edmund clapped his hands together briskly. "We shall present her at the trial, and her testimony should be more than enough to exonerate Malcolm!"

"Marcus," Dand corrected.

"Him too, yes!" Edmund agreed, rising from the table.

But Sorch a remained seated, her eyes fixed on Daisy's.

The old woman smiled faintly. "There is more ye wish tae ask of me, is there nae? About this man ye care for so very deeply?"

"Aye," she answered. "What do you know of the circumstances by which he came to Castle Fraser?"

Daisy chuckled mirthlessly. "On *that* subject, my lady, I happen to know considerably more than anyone else. Or at least, anyone living."

Several hours later, almost everyone in the Fraser clan was

gathered within the courtyard of the castle as Malcolm stood before them. Nathan addressed the assembly solemnly.

“I must commend my adoptive brother for coming forward after so many years to face justice for his crime,” he intoned. “He had honor when we were children together—before this tragic misstep, at least—and he shows honor now that he is grown. Because of this, I am prepared to spare his life, though he will be consigned to the dungeons for the remainder of it.”

“Before that sentence is carried out,” Sorcha’s voice echoed through the courtyard, “there is one more who would give testimony this day!”

Nathan gazed at Sorcha incredulously as she approached with Daisy, Dand, and Edmund. “What on earth are you doing here, Lady Sorcha? I had thought our business concluded! And... my God, is that *Daisy* you have with you, who used to serve our father? What is going on?”

For his part, Malcolm could only stare at her, bewildered.

Sorcha led Daisy to the center of the courtyard, where she looked out at all the members of the clan, her chin jutting defiantly. “Some among ye were once servants of this place,” she began in her quavering voice. “Aye, an’ some of ye were kin tae ones who were. Ye ken full well who was tae blame fer what happened tae the stable boy that awful night. Ye have supported this ghastly lie fer years, as I did, an’ I cannae blame ye. But now this poor innocent lad has returned... forced to, no doubt, by his selfish coward of a brother. Will ye truly stand by an’ allow him tae be punished so?”

Nathan snickered. “Surely, you do not believe this pitiful speech will be enough to sway what occurs here this day?”

“No, I did not think it would,” Sorcha admitted. “However, Daisy has not yet said all that she must.”

“Indeed not,” Daisy agreed, looking Nathan square in the eye. “I have one more thing tae confess this day, Laird Nathan. A thing that even ye dinnae know. Yer father an’ his wretched brother Oban often plotted against their rivals, the Hamilton clan. One night, whilst drunk, they ordered me sister Rose—who was carryin’ on wi’ a servant of the Hamiltons—tae arrange for the theft of that family’s only male child. Threatened ‘er, they did, if she didnae go along wi’ their plan. So she did, God help her. She snuck into the castle wi’ her lover’s aid,

an' stole away that poor infant, that the Hamiltons would be thrown into turmoil an' their line of succession interrupted."

Nathan turned white as a sheet. "Surely you don't mean..."

"Very much so, Laird Nathan!" Edmund laughed. "You may enjoy spreading rumors and lies about how your bloodline is tied to royalty, but all the while, your adopted brother was the lost son of Kester Hamilton—he who would have been the rightful king of Scotland had the British not taken over!"

"And you expect Marcus to be released over such *hearsay* and *gossip* from a feeble old woman?" Nathan protested. "You expect that my clansmen will reject my rule over that?!"

"I have no opinion with regard to whether your people keep you as their laird or not," Sorcha replied evenly. "That is entirely their affair. However, with regard to the release of Marcus, I expect that you will do precisely that in order to avoid war with another clan."

"Oh?" Nathan chortled. "The Campbells are willing to go to war with me over such a thing?"

"Not the Campbells," Edmund said. "The Hamiltons, though, will be quite eager to reunite with their long-lost offspring. And as Laird Fergus Brodie is already riding to inform them of these events, I suspect they will be here soon indeed to meet him. Would you have him in shackles upon their arrival?"

Now Nathan was beginning to visibly perspire, and it almost appeared as though his knees might give out beneath him. He scanned the faces of the members of his clan as they looked upon him, their expressions judging and mistrustful.

They would not fight for him if the Hamiltons came.

In truth, they might not fight for him or serve him at all—ever again.

"Very well," Nathan spoke up hoarsely. "He shall be released at once, with the condition that he is never to return to these lands. I believe that under the circumstances, exile is...a fair punishment, yes. And a just one."

He nodded to the castle guards, who exchanged glances and unlocked the chains around Malcolm's wrists.

Malcolm took a few steps forward, and Sorcha ran toward him, throwing her arms around him and holding him tight.

"Sorcha," he breathed. "H-How did you do all of this?"

“You saved me,” she whispered simply, “so I saved you too.”

It was nightfall, and the summer lightning bugs hovered and flickered over the tall grass as Edmund and Dand strolled together in the direction of the Hamilton lands.

“Romantic, isn’t it?” Edmund commented, stooping to pick a wildflower.

Dand turned to him, scowling. “That was *not* the thought your company naturally brought to my mind, sir, no.”

“Not for *us*, you dolt!” Edmund chuckled. “I was referring to the lovesick pair behind us.”

Sorcha walked hand in hand with “Malcolm,” who had invited them to freely call him by his real name now that his name had been cleared, though Sorcha suspected that it might take her a while to become accustomed to that.

*Perhaps I should simply call him “my love” for now*, she thought gleefully, looking up into his piercing green eyes and admiring the way they caught the starlight.

Suddenly, they heard a joyful noise from over the hill ahead of them: music.

The sound of flutes and drums and bagpipes filled the night air, and singing as well.

Then the banners were lifted high, displaying the tartan and seal of the Hamilton clan.

There were hundreds of them pouring over the hilltop—men, women, children, soldiers, artisans, and peasants. It appeared as though the entire clan had rushed out to meet Marcus upon hearing the news of his existence from Fergus.

And sure enough, Laird Fergus Brodie was in their midst, personally leading a man dressed in ornate ancestral armor and robes.

He had a long white beard and eyes whose color matched Marcus's perfectly.

"Can this be him?!" the older man exclaimed, running forward with his arms spread. "Can this be the son I thought I had lost all those years ago? Come, my beautiful boy, and let me look upon your face!"

He embraced Marcus with tears in his eyes. Marcus appeared stunned and uncertain at first, and then he threw his head back and laughed, returning the embrace. "Aye, Father! God be praised, we have found each other at last!"

They cackled and cried together, and the rest of the Hamilton clan crowded in to look upon the face of the boy who had been tragically lost so many years ago—the boy who had grown into not only a man but a warrior. They were awestruck, and many of them even reached out to brush him with their fingertips, as though proving to themselves that he was real.

"Well!" the old man sniffed, wiping the tears from his cheeks, "now that we have found our way back to each other, lad, I suppose we ought to be properly introduced! I am Laird Iain Hamilton."

"And I am Marcus," his son responded. "I was Marcus Fraser, and then I was Malcolm Haldane..."

"...and now you are Marcus once more, and you may be called by your rightful name of Hamilton, with all the honors and privileges that go along with it! Welcome home, my child!"

A cheer arose from Hamilton's clansmen, and Edmund and Dand happily joined in.

There was a great celebration at Castle Hamilton, one that continued well past dawn, with more music, dancing, and many toasts to the return of Iain Hamilton's rightful heir. Dand and Edmund gladly joined in the festivities, speaking to as many of the Hamiltons as they could in order to forge new relationships and explore lucrative possibilities between their two clans.

At one point, Marcus took Sorcha aside, away from the din of the revelry, and took her hands, looking deep into her eyes. "So, then. It seems I am a noble after all. And not just a noble..."

"But a king, of sorts," she finished with a smile. "And a warrior, and, well, a wolf-killer. Somehow, despite the fact that your true identity was hidden all this time, I knew it was meant to be you."



“Just as I have known, from the first moment we met, that I was put on this earth to be with you,” Marcus said. “Will you be my bride, then, Lady Sorcha Campbell?”

“Aye, Marcus Hamilton,” she replied happily. “And I shall love you for the rest of my days.”

Marcus laughed, then stood upon the nearest table, pulling Sorcha up to join him. “I have an announcement to make to all assembled here and to every living creature in the world if they will hear me! Lady Sorcha has agreed to marry me and join our two clans!”

A celebratory roar filled the great hall of the Hamiltons, and the wine, ale, and mead flowed freely. Laird Iain hugged Sorcha, warmly welcoming her into their family.

They remained there for the following week as the wedding details were planned and prepared. There had been some talk of conducting the ceremony at Castle Campbell; however, with the plague still raging through that area, it seemed like an unsafe (and, indeed, insensitive) idea to celebrate there. However, Laird Iain pledged to send as many healers as he could with them when they returned to the Campbell lands to ease the burden of the ones who were already there and overworked.

So Moire came to join Fergus at Castle Hamilton, along with Freya and Aodh, and all of the Campbell siblings were happily reunited once more. Sorcha was beyond delighted to see Aodh and Freya in good health again when they had been so horribly ill the last time she’d laid eyes upon them.

“I feared the worst,” she said as she hugged them tightly, her eyes filling with tears. “I feared I would lose you both, and I could not have survived such a thing... Not after all the years we spent in captivity together, and not after our family had already endured so much misery and heartache!”

“There is no need to fret any longer, Sister,” Aodh said in his usual stoic fashion. “All is well.”

She ruffled his hair playfully, amused as always by how mature he tried to seem despite his relatively tender years. “Tell me, how did the healers remove the sickness from you both?”

Freya shrugged. “They used lots of dried herbs and flower buds, and they mashed them all together with other things. They would not tell us what. Only that we would be cured...and we were!”

*Damn their secrecy, Sorcha thought. I am betrothed to my true love, and I am happy for it, but it will not remove the plague from our lands. Perhaps I was a fool to believe in curses and prophecies.*

Still, all of that would have to wait. For now, she had a wedding to prepare for.

The marriage was an even grander and more lavish affair than Marcus's homecoming celebration had been. The Hamiltons may not have been in line to be kings anymore—not under English rule, at any rate—but they were still one of the wealthiest clans in Scotland, and Laird Iain spared no expense in decorating the castle and inviting the lairds and ladies of the clans who were allied with him.

When the blessed day came, the bride and groom exchanged their vows and kissed, and a mighty cheer arose that seemed to travel from one end of Scotland to the other. The revels lasted for countless hours until almost every cask of wine in the castle had been drained, and the guests had danced for so long their legs could scarcely move.

Then Marcus led Sorcha to the guest chambers they now shared and took her in his powerful arms. Their lips met again, though this kiss was quite different from the one they shared on the altar. It was more private and tender, more loving, sweeter than any kiss they'd ever had before.

Because it was filled not only with adoration but the expectation of what would follow.

Slowly, gently, he untied the laces of her wedding gown and slipped it down from her shoulders, revealing her lovely body. Each soft contour of her caught the flickering light of the fire in the hearth, making the surface of her smooth skin seem to ripple and dance with her desire for him. She stood, allowing him to view her fully. It was the first time she had ever been naked before a man, and she relished the strangeness of it, the vulnerability she was able to indulge in with him, knowing that she could trust him with her life, her heart.

Then Marcus removed his own clothes, his eyes never leaving her magnificent form until he, too, was nude and exposed before her.

They could have pounced and lunged at each other right then, like a pair of wild animals. There was a part of each of them that desperately wanted to.

But instead, they simply stood inches away from each other, savoring the moment, the way their love for each other burned in the

air between them, invisible but hotter than the most raging bonfire. They both hovered on the edge of it, allowing themselves to be warmed and teased by it.

Suddenly, they could wait no longer. They plunged in and were consumed by the fire of their love, melting them down and reforming them into one being, as disparate pieces of metal are forged into a single strong sword.

Their hands explored each other's bodies eagerly, sliding across skin and combing through hair. Sorcha's nails dug into Marcus's back, and her teeth bit the corner of his mouth, almost hard enough to draw blood. The hiss that escaped his lips spoke of pain and pleasure combined into one and wordlessly begged for more.

She had every intention of giving it to him.

Sorcha lowered herself to her knees, finally breaking eye contact with him so that she could gaze upon his stiff and quivering manhood. She took it into her mouth, allowing it in as far as it would go until its tip brushed the back of her throat. He let out a low moan that was just on the edge of being a howl, the wild baying a wolf might let out beneath a full and glowing moon.

His hands were on her head, his rough fingers running through the locks of her hair as she pleased him. When he could take no more, he pulled away from her and bent down, picking her up swiftly and carrying her to the bed. She was breathless in his arms, and she felt as though the two of them could take flight together, soar through the window and into the night sky, that they might fly toward the horizon to greet the very dawn.

*And indeed we might,* she thought deliriously, *for now we are married and have the rest of our lives to spend in each other's embrace.*

Marcus pushed her knees apart gently, and now it was his turn to gaze at what was between them—slick and glistening and eager for his touch.

And touch it, he did.

His fingers caressed her delicate folds, and she opened up for him like a flower thirsty for rain.

He positioned himself above her, and their eyes burned into each other once more as he silently asked permission to enter her, and she granted it just as silently. Their souls spoke without words; they had no need for them.

He thrust inside her, and she gasped, feeling him fill her completely. The length of him reached up into parts of her that she had not known existed, and those areas within her bloomed into sharp and sudden life. Their hips moved against each other in a fierce and dizzying rhythm, and when their mouths connected again, they passed the same breath back and forth between them until it felt as though she might faint.

His climax rushed within her, and hers came just a moment later like a summer shower cooling the shimmering heat of the ground in its refreshing deluge. Exquisite delight flowed through every part of her body.

And somehow, she knew that it would only get better from there.

Meanwhile, something decidedly odd occurred some distance away, in the lands of the Campbells. As the sun broke over the hillsides to the east, its light cascaded across the fields of blue flowers that grew there—the very same flowers that Sorcha wore in her hair, the ones she had shared with Dand and his family in the dungeons.

The same ones, in fact, that grew plentifully in the land of the healers where Aodh and Freya had found their good health again.

The tiny petals of these flowers opened to the sunlight, and a cool breeze shook them, dislodging clouds of pollen that drifted down to the village and beyond. The fine grains of this golden substance wafted from home to home and were inhaled by every member of the Campbell clan.

Some of them suffered from mild coughs or itchy eyes.

But all of the afflicted were healed.

Perhaps all of this was simply a happy coincidence, the natural change of seasons doing as it always did, without a care for whether the pollen could cure the illness that ravaged the Campbells.

Then again, perhaps there is a certain truth to curses and prophecies, at that.



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## **The Legend of the Campbell Clan**

Book #1

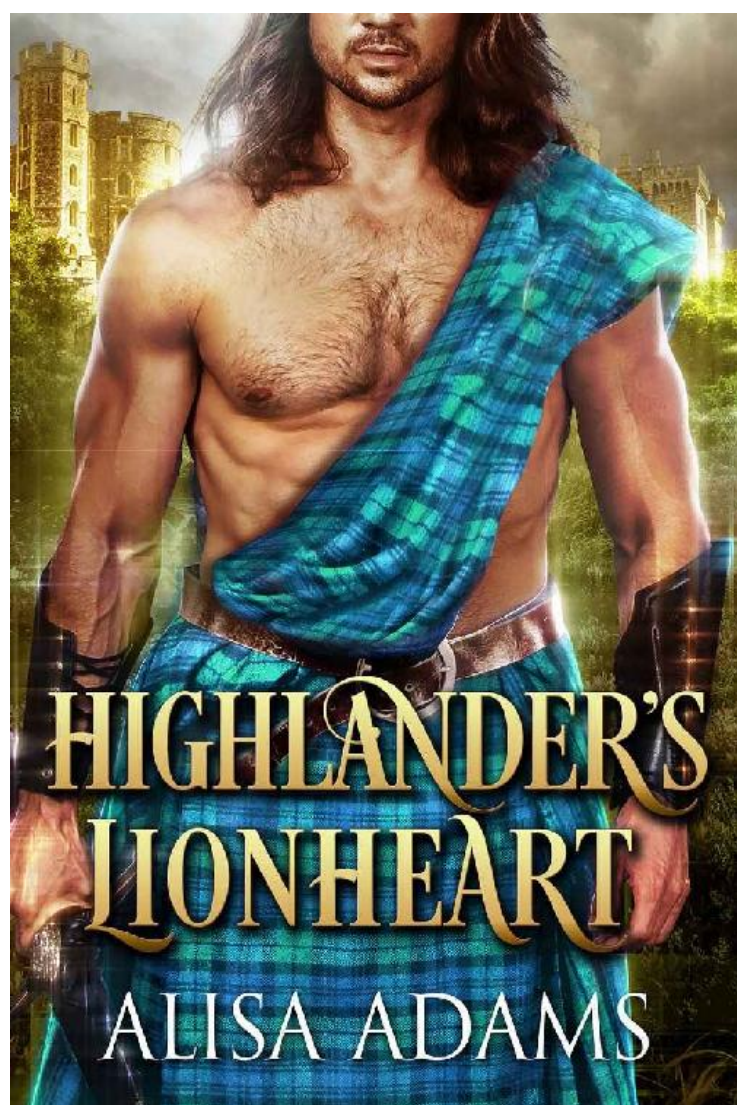
*The Niece of His Highland Enemy*

Book #2

*The Return of the Lost Highlander*

Book #3 (this book)

Awaiting the Wolf Killer Highlander





## Chapter 1

**T**he Scottish Highlands in the late 1700's

Godet Ross sat wearily upon her giant of a horse, her hips swaying with the big draft horses' walk as her clan's tartan blew over her shoulder in the wind. Her long, black, and unruly curls streamed out behind her as well. It had come loose from a hastily put up braid this morning. She knew it would have been wiser to put the horse in harness to pull the cumbersome and heavy traveling coach that was lumbering along behind her at some distance, but she had left quickly. If the slow-moving coach was overtaken and they lost their trunks full of their belongings, so be it. She was not going to chance leaving her horse behind nor her sisters, her aunt, or the other large draft horses her clan was known for.

Mungan Ross had everything now. But not her. Not her sisters. Not the horses.

Godet looked ahead along the winding dirt road that weaved endlessly through the grassy Highlands, its path disappearing behind hills and climbing up craggy barren peaks only to be seen again in an open view of more grass. Endless, endless grass dotted with sheep. How she had come to hate sheep.

"I dinnae see nothing but mauchit sheep!"

Godet looked down from her big horse and smiled wearily at the tiny, older lady on the small Highland pony beside her. Her Aunt Hextilda spat at the ground as she glared at all the sheep.

"Aye, Aunt Hexy, Mungan thinks he is being canny clearing out our clansmen and using the land for sheep. He dinnae agree with me that he is naught but a blootered skiver!" She sighed tiredly, remembering her fierce argument with her drunken uncle when he had cleared her clan out of their homes, all to make a larger profit off

of sheep. She winced as she pushed the wild, dark curls away from the side of her face, "I'm gaunnie work on it, aunt. There isnae much I can dae until I get the MacDonell's help."

"I know, dearie. But 'tis fair puggled and puckled I am," her aunt said with a harrumphing noise.

"Aye, aunt, me too," Godet replied quietly as she looked back at her three sisters on the other big draft horses straggling behind her. "I am sure we are all weary. Why dinnae ye and the girls go ride in the coach. 'Tis a bit more comfortable fer ye perhaps?"

"Nonsense that is, I can still ride. I dinnae need to be closed up in yon carriage where I cannae be smelling my braw highlands and heather and gorse." Aunt Hextilda looked up at the eldest of her nieces. Noting the weariness on her young face. She had the weight of her clan on her shoulders. Ever since her parents had died and that skiver Mungan had come to Castle Fionnaghall, declaring himself Laird and joining in the Clearances to sweep out crofters and clansmen in lieu of the profit from sheep.

Aunt Hextilda studied Godet with wise old eyes that peered up at her niece from her hooded cloak. Godet was such a bonny young lass and her three sisters were as bonny as she, each so very different. Godet had dark hair that blew wild and free as the winds in the Highlands, her eyes were the silvery, blue-gray color of a stormy Highland sky. The muted red plaid of the Ross clan was proudly worn on her gown and the tartan she had wrapped around her shoulders. She should have married by now and had the protection of a man. Then none of this would have been necessary.

"We will be arriving in MacDonell lands soon, aunt. Then we can rest." Godet looked down at her aunt. "Ye sure that ye sent the message? I just dinnae understand why I wasnae told aboot this betrothal between myself and Gordon..."

"Och and sure I am that yer dear parents died before they could tell ye. But Gordon and his parents will remember the pact to be sure. Ye'll see. Dinnae ye fash noo," Aunt Hextilda added quickly, looking away from her niece.

"I think Aunt Hexy is up to something as usual Godet," her sister Flori said as she came riding up on her own big draft horse.

"I agree," Ceena added as she too caught up with Godet on her draft. "Where has he been? Why hasnae he come to claim ye before

this?"

"In the tales, he would have come riding up just as Uncle Mungan was yelling and putting up sich a fright!" Ina, the youngest sister exclaimed in her dramatic voice as she rode up on her draft mare. "With Mungan tossing out the poor, weeping crofters into the cold as ye stood between him and their poor burning crofts. He would have swept ye up onto his magnificent horse and carried ye away before Uncle Mungan could strike ye again..."

Godet rolled her eyes. "Dae ye ken that is the stuff of fairy tales, Ina?"

Ina looked down at her hands where she held the reins of her horse. "Mither told me tales like that, it could happen," she said adamantly.

Aunt Hextilda smiled indulgently up at Ina from her pony. Neither she nor her pony seemed bothered at being surrounded by the huge draft horses. They were used to it. Though her pony puffed up and pranced a bit in their presence, letting them know that he was big too.

Godet stared at her sisters. She loved them more than anything. She would dae what she had to in order to keep them safe. If that meant showing up at Castle Conall and demanding Gordon MacDonell marry her according to some old betrothal from when they were children, then she would put aside her pride and dae that. Then she would find a way to get her clansman's homes back and hopefully, Castle Fionnaghall as well.

Her sister Flori reached over and put her hand on Godet's, looking mournfully at her face. "It's a crumbling pile of stone," Flori told her in a sad, serious tone. "Let Mungan have it, Godet. There's naught there for us anymore."

"But the clan..." Godet began, her voice thick with frustration and sadness as she stared back at her sister.

"Clan means family, isnae that right? Family is the people, not the place," Flori said sorrowfully.

Godet turned her hand up and squeezed her sister's hand.

"We have each other and Aunt Hexy," Ina said bravely, her blonde curls blowing around her face.

"Plus, we saved the Clydesdale stallion and mares!" Ceena laughed happily as she patted her horse.

Godet smiled and patted her big stallion as she looked at her

sisters.

Flori was ever the pragmatist. She was dark-haired like Godet, but somehow, her face was a bolder more dramatic version of her own. She kept Godet from overthinking things. But now, she was always sad, always serious. Mungan was responsible for that. He had killed Flori's beloved on the eve before their wedding. Flori had witnessed it herself and Godet had come upon Flori in hysterics with Mungan's soldiers surrounding her. Mungan was raising his hand over her where she kneeled on the ground over her beloved's body. Flori had never said what had happened and didn't say if Mungan had struck her for disobeying him. But Godet had stopped him from hurting Flori in that moment. He had happily beaten Godet instead since she was the eldest.

Ceena was always playful. She loved the horses and it was her idea to ride the breeding horses away from the castle. This line of Clydesdales had been in their family clan going back generations and were highly prized for field work, carriage pulling, and in old times, riding into battle. They were theirs, not Mungan's, just as Ceena had stated. Ceena had striking green eyes and their father's tawny, brown hair alongside his merry disposition. She could train and ride any type of horse. She lived and breathed horses.

Little Ina being the youngest still lived on dreams and fairy tales. She looked like a tiny angel with her dark blonde hair and clear blue eyes.

Godet knew that if her parents were still alive, she and her sisters would all most probably be married by now, except perhaps for Ina. Within a year, she too would have been married. Mungan being the greedy skiver that he was had been working on the best and most advantageous betrothals he could find. Flori's betrothed was not his choice, and the marriage did not bring him any advantages, so he got rid of him. It was another reason that Godet had agreed to her aunt's scheme to leave for the MacDonell's castle immediately after her last skirmish with Uncle Mungan. He had hit her again, badly that time, for trying to intervene between his soldiers and her crofters whose huts they were burning. Mungan was proving that he was dangerous as well as violent.

She was praying that the MacDonells were as she remembered them: wealthy, civilized, and strong in their family bonds. Their own

mother had been a MacDonell. As for Gordon MacDonell, she only had brief memories of him from clan games in the summers: a thin boy who teased her and pulled her hair.

If Gordon would not marry her, she would appeal to the clan Laird for help and protection until she knew what to dae.

## Chapter 2

**G**ordon MacDonell set a grueling pace. He had to intercept her.

Godet Ross betrothed to himself? His parents had never mentioned it! Though he knew they were very close to the Ross' and they had always met up with them at the summer games. But a betrothal?

He could not have Godet Ross showing up at Conall Castle claiming to be his betrothed. He was already betrothed! Brigda was at his castle right now, planning their wedding. With Brigda's temper, who knew what would happen? She was a fiery lass and had led him quite the chase, but she had just recently agreed to be his wife.

His brother Tristan rode beside him. That grin had not left his face since the moment the message had arrived and they had ridden out of the castle. He was vastly amused by this turn of events. Gordon knew that Tristan did not like Brigda, not one bit.

Neither did his other men that were traveling with them. All his men knew that Castle Conall was for training soldiers. It was no place for women, in fact, women were not welcome. Brigda had proven to be... difficult. Gordon was surly and his temper was rising with each bit of ground they covered.

He spotted them after noon and breathed a sigh of relief. He was in time to stop Godet and turn her back. He urged his horse on faster with his brother right behind him. He galloped full speed up to the small traveling group and spun his horse to a stop in front of them.

The girl in the front on the huge Clydesdale stopped her horse and turned him sideways, blocking the others. She pulled out a small dirk and was staring at him fiercely, the knife pointed directly at him. "Dinnae ye move a step closer to me or my sisters, I'm giving ye fair warning!" she called out to him. Her voice was clear and lilting.

Gordon studied the vision before him, trying to control his shock.

He remembered the big Clydesdale horses the Ross clan was known for breeding. This was definitely Godet. How could he have forgotten those long, silky, black curls of hers? Her hair fell to a tiny waist that curved out to the gentle swell of her hips. But it was her eyes that brought back the memories with their strange but eerily beautiful silver-blue color. She had the longest dark lashes he had ever seen which were sweeping over those bewitching eyes. Those eyes had always mesmerized him, even as a young boy.

She wore the Ross plaid in her skirts that billowed out over her horses back. The lace that was at her wrists and was also peering out of the tight bodice she wore made her look impossibly more feminine as she sat on the giant of a horse. She looked at him bravely, not showing even a hint of fear in that upraised chin of hers. Yet, he noted the slight tremble of her slender, delicate hand on the reins of her horse. Gordon frowned. She was impossibly lovely. The young girl he remembered with the strange eyes had grown into a stunningly beautiful woman. And she was a problem he didn't need nor want. She was possibly even more beautiful than the buxom, red-haired Brigda waiting to marry him back at Castle Conall.

"Put that silly dirk away, lass. 'Tis I, Gordon MacDonell, and I mean ye no harm," he greeted a little irritably.

Godet frowned back at the man who was staring at her so brutishly and who was clearly annoyed. "Ye are Gordon?" Her eyes quickly traveled over his form. This was no skinny young boy. This was a man—a very large, very muscular man. Dark, wavy hair curled down from his head to touch the collar of his billowy white linen shirt. He had on a kilt in the dark blue and green of the MacDonell clan. The dark blue and green made his emerald eyes shine brilliantly as he stared so brazenly at her. His chin was square and firm, his nose was straight, and his lips were full, though they were now thinned in irritation. He clearly was not happy to see her.

Godet's eyes traveled further down in her study of the man before her. She could not miss the big, muscular thighs and tall, black boots gripping the large black stallion he controlled so effortlessly. No man in her clan could carry off the wearing of the kilt like the warriors of old, but this man did. She swallowed and turned her eyes away, knowing she was blushing hotly. Gordon MacDonell had certainly grown up well.

She put her dirk back into her belt and continued her study of Gordon and the men who were beside him. All were on big, black horses—almost as big as the horses she and her sisters rode. Her horses were giants, she knew no other horses could match their size or strength, but these big men rode horses fit for their size. They were big, muscular, powerful and intimidating. She met Gordon's brutish stare. Keeping her chin up, Godet refused to break the contact that his eyes held on hers.

She wasn't aware that her sisters had come forward and were flanking her. All were staring at the men in front of them, except Ceena who was studying the black horses, of course, not the men on them.

Aunt Hextilda pushed her way in between the large draft horses and peered up at Gordon MacDonell. "Weel noo, if ye dinnae grow up to be quite the man!" Aunt Hextilda said appreciatively.

"Aunt Hextilda? Is that ye?" Gordon exclaimed as he looked down on the incongruously little woman riding the pony in the midst of the young women on the huge draft horses. "Ye are still alive old woman?" He laughed.

"Shame on ye, young Gordon, such haiver ye be talkin. I'll outlive all ye foolish young'uns. Besides, I cannae leave this Earth without seeing me poor nieces safely wed, noo ken I?"

Godet let out a soft groan of embarrassment.

"Aunt Hexy, please," implored a girl that looked a bit like Godet, but darker, bolder in figure, not as delicate as Godet.

"I'd marry any man that rode a horse as fine as those big blacks..." This was spoken by a girl with hair reminiscent of the color of corn and wheat in the autumn fields. She smiled unabashedly as she stared at the horses. Her eyes were a bright, crystal green and had a slant to them that made them look like they were always smiling or laughing.

"Ye see, Godet, look at him. He wears a kilt like a warrior. He will save us all, just like in the stories," the smallest of girls stated. Gordon heard Godet groan again. He stared at the tiny, slip of a girl who had spoken. She was all golden and delicate like a small angel.

Gordon turned to Godet who was blushing hotly. Bright spots of pink were shown on her creamy cheeks. "I take it these are yer sisters?" he asked, watching her closely. Her lips were lush and pink and he had trouble looking away from her. She was too beautiful. In



fact, each of these girls was a beauty. *But Godet... no one could compare to her beauty*, he thought. He wondered why she had brought them all. A simple maidservant and her aunt as a chaperone would have sufficed. *What did the little blonde one mean by 'he would save them all'?*

"Aye, they are," she answered him quietly but firmly. "Our traveling coach with our luggage and some servants are a ways back. The coach is slower. We found it more comfortable to ride our horses," she explained.

"Ye ride a stallion?"

"Aye, I dae," she answered, raising her chin again.

He looked to the others.

"Ours are mares," Ceena answered, and added with a smile, "All in foal to Godets' stallion. We couldnae leave them behind, dae ye ken?"

Gordon frowned. His irritation at the predicament he was in passing to his own stallion who clearly did not like the huge stallion Godet sat on and started to prance. Gordon stilled him and opened his mouth to tell her she had to turn around when the sound of galloping horses caught his attention. His stallion and Godets snorted and spun toward the sound. A small group of soldiers came over a ridge, heading straight toward them. They wore what looked like the Ross plaid. He relaxed thinking that some of their clansmen were going to stop them and bring them back, that this was all a mistake.

Godet's face, however, turned white with fear and her hands trembled on the reins. She shortened them and held them tighter. Godet looked back at her sisters and saw Flori's eyes widen in stark fear. "Flori, stay strong for me now, I beg ye!"

"But 'tis Mungan's soldiers again, Godet," Flori muttered, her voice raw with memories and anxiousness.

"Dae not fear, Flori. We are with ye. Just stay behind me. Aunt Hexy! Ceena! Ina! Get behind me!" She rode forward and stopped her horse again, turning the horse's huge body to block her sisters and aunt from the soldiers' view.

Gordon rode up beside her as the soldiers came closer. He gave an invisible signal to his men to surround the women.

"Dae ye have any weapons on ye?" she asked him urgently in a hushed tone.

Gordon grunted and then growled in his deep voice. "What dae ye take me for?"

“Weel noo, where be they? Under that kilt of yours?” she quipped with a quick look at him and one brow raised before turning back to watch the approaching riders.

She heard his short laugh and then the whistle of steel leaving its scabbard. She saw out of the side of her eye that he had pulled a long sword out of the scabbard on his saddle and had settled it into place at his belt where it was in full view. She grimaced, hoping there would be no need for it, but she touched her dirk reassuringly where it rested in her belt.

Godet recognized the first soldier leading the others. It was Mungan’s man. She and her sisters had left while Mungan was away hunting. In reality, she knew he was thieving. Mungan’s man had been too bloated with whiskey to be aware they had gone—until now.

He rode directly up to her and sneered at her. “Ye dinnae have permission to leave ye cheeky gallus girl! Git yerselves back to the castle!”

“I willnae,” Godet’s voice trembled even as she spoke quietly but firmly. “And I am *Lady* Godet to ye. I am fulfilling my parents’ betrothal agreement to Gordon of the MacDonell clan. Ye cannae have anything to say about it.”

“Yer parents are dead! Ye answer to Mungan now and he says ye willnae be marrying a MacDonell!” He looked over at Flori and the other sisters and grinned evilly. “In fact, he says ye’ll be marrying *him*!” he sneered at her and laughed. “And perhaps I’ll be having my choice from the rest of ye.”

Godet reeled back at the news that Mungan planned on marrying her. Her face went ashen and she clutched at her stomach as a terrible feeling of fear swept over her. She could hear Flori whimper.

Gordon watched quietly. He did not know that the Ross’ had died. He did know who Mungan was, however. His lips formed a thin line as he stared with steely eyes at the soldier sneering at Godet who was visibly shaking now.

“I willnae!” she said in a fervent whisper. “And ye willnae touch any of me sisters ever again either!”

The soldier rode his horse forward, pushing his horse roughly into hers, and struck her hard across the face. Godet fell sideways from the force of the blow and started to come off her horse. Gordon caught her instantly, pulling her effortlessly onto his horse and onto his lap.

“Dae not ever dare to touch this woman or any of her kin ever again!” Gordon spat in a steely, deep voice. He held Godet tightly to his chest.

“The Ross’ dae not take orders from a MacDonell soldier,” sneered the man again, this time at Gordon.

“Then take orders from the Laird of Clan MacDonell, ye swine!” Gordon’s voice thundered at him in fury. A wind blew down from the craggy hills, sweeping his plaid out behind him and whipping his hair back in the wind as well. He raised his voice to a mighty roar as if taking power from the winds off the mountains. “This woman is under my protection as the Laird of Clan MacDonell! Touch her and face death. *Dae ye ken?*” he barked in a harsh, commanding voice. His voice was strong, dominating—a voice that was used to issuing commands and being obeyed.

The soldier shrank back at his words, staring aghast at Gordon. “I dinnae know ‘twas ye, Laird! I was just following orders! I have no quarrel with ye, Laird!”

“Orders to strike a woman? Only a weak coward such as yerself or Mungan strikes women!” Gordon growled, his deep voice going down an octave in his disgust at the man before him.

The soldier’s feigned deference to the Laird of Clan MacDonell melted off his face and he sneered again. “Mungan will hear of this! Ye havenae heard the last of him!” he warned and wheeled his horse around and rode away. The other soldiers that came with him quickly fell in beside him.

Gordon watched them ride away with his jaw tight and his eyes narrowed into green slits as he held the fragrant bundle of trembling woman against his chest. Her firm round buttocks fit perfectly in his lap between his thighs, driving his heartbeat up several notches. He willed his body to ignore what he was feeling.

“Weel now, brother, ‘tis a fine dither ye have to sort out here ‘t isn’t it?” Tristan teased with laughter in his voice.

Gordon looked down to see Godet staring up at him. Her beautiful eyes looked confused and her full luscious lips were open slightly as she stared. He fought off the urge to bend down and kiss her. It would only take a slight tilting of his head for their lips to meet. He started to lower his head, his fingers lifting her chin up, just enough so that he could position her mouth where he wanted her against his own

mouth, but her words stopped him cold.

“Laird? Ye are Laird of the Clan MacDonell?”

“Aye,” he answered gruffly. Hadn’t she known? Isn’t this why she had come to him? Hadn’t she wanted to demand he carry on with the betrothal because he was the Laird of the powerful Clan MacDonell?

Gordon stared down at those tempting lips and those hauntingly, beautiful eyes. He heard a voice over the rushing of his blood pounding through his body, it was the voice of her youngest sister.

“’Tis just like the fairy tale, isnae it?” said Ina with a big smile.



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